

IRAQ WAR FILMS:  
DEFINING A SUBGENRE

A Master's Thesis

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by

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January 2015

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### IRAQ WAR FILMS: DEFINING A SUBGENRE

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This thesis analyzes a new subgenre of war films, concentrating on particular case of Iraq War films. Treating the war film genre within the notion of a historical event, war is here understood as a setting rather than a direct battlefield experience. Consequently, this thesis recognizes the subgenre of Iraq War films as encapsulating the experiences from both the warzone and homefront. The focus here is thus not only limited to the soldiers at the front, but also to their families, overseeing the trauma as happening in the U.S. While trying to distinguish the conventions of this new subgenre, this dissertation also focuses on the historical context of the war, comparing the War on Terror's context and representations to those of the World War II and Vietnam War. Ultimately, defining Iraq War films is set on the axis of the previous war films' conventions, the new technological nature of warfare, and an intimate link between the postmodern influence that affects both narrative and visual style of Iraq War films.

Keywords: Iraq War, films, cinema, genre, postmodernism, soldier

## ÖZET

### IRAK SAVAŞ FİLMLERİ: ALT TÜR BELİRLEME

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Bu tez çalışması, savaş filmlerinin yeni bir alt türünü analiz etmekte ve özel olarak Irak Savaş filmlerini temel örnek almaktadır. Tarihsel olarak savaş konseptinin sinemada yer aldığı gerçeğine dayanarak savaş sadece doğrudan muharebe alanı tecrübesi olarak değil, arka planda ilerleyen bir durum olarak incelenmiştir. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma Irak Savaş filmleri alt türünü hem muharebe hemde sivil cephede yaşananlar olarak kapsamaktadır. Tez çalışmasının odak noktası sadece ön cephede savaşan askerlerle sınırlı değil, bu askerlerin aileleri ve Amerika’da yaşanan travmalarıda içermektedir. Bu yeni türün kurallarını ortaya koymaya çalışırken bir taraftanda savaş konseptinin tarihi altyapısını, İkinci Dünya Savaşı ve Vietnam Savaşındaki terrorisimle savaş bağlamıyla kıyaslamaktadır. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, Irak Savaş filmlerinin eski savaş filmlerindeki genel geçer kurallarla aynı çizgide olduğunu vurgulamakla birlikte, yeni nesil teknolojik muharebenin doğası, postmodern etki ve Irak Savaş filmleri arasındaki yakın bağı bulmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Keywords: Irak Savaşı, filmler, sinema, tür, postmodern, asker

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Total war takes us from military secrecy (the second-hand, recorded truth of the battlefield) to the overexposure of live broadcast. For with the advent of strategic bombing everything is now brought home to the cities, and it is no longer just the few but a whole mass of spectator-survivors who are the surviving spectators of combat. (...) [T]he streets themselves have now become a permanent film-set for army cameras or the tourist-reporters of global civil war (...) The West, after adjusting from the political illusions of the cinema-city (...) has now plunged into the transpolitical pan-cinema of the nuclear age, into an entirely cinematic vision of the world.*

Paul Virilio (1992: 66)

The reality and execution of war has changed throughout the decades with the technological progress that brought advances in both weaponry and communication. These developments resulted in a more and more electronic battlefield, with the Internet and immediate access to information initiating the time-space compression that allows both spectators and actors to be part of the same spectacle. In case of recent U.S. wars, which are conducted with the usage and aide of these technological advances, war representations in films often try to encapsulate the new war reality within its generic conventions. Compared with previous wars' films, these representations of recent conflicts offer a different outlook on war.

This thesis is about the changes in the war film as a genre, as seen in connection to the actual historical event. It argues that these changes have been caused by this

technological progress as seen in effect of postmodernism's influence. The case study is here the Iraq War, and its predecessor the Gulf War, often labeled as the first postmodern war. The discussed representations of World War II and the Vietnam War show how differently the filmmakers engaged with these earlier wars. For this purpose, this thesis presents major films within their own subcategories and locates genre's progress in relevant social and historical contexts. The definition of a war film is here treated as an umbrella term, encapsulating all films that take place in the warzone, those that show postwar problems of dealing with trauma, and those that focus on homefront experiences during wartime.

The war film genre is thus seen here in direct relation to the historical event of war. Accordingly, the narratives in the war films are negotiated war experiences, and resolved conflicts of daily life. These films neutralize the threats of war and put them into social context, making the war part of national experience. And while some films encourage war propaganda—therefore fulfilling the government's goals in justifying the war—some repudiate it and speak openly against it. Whatever the ideological premise of these films, however, they often use the mass imagery of war to promote reflection on war in general.

This thesis proposes content analysis, focused on the close reading of key Iraq War films, to show how these representations introduce a new subgenre to the category of war films, a subgenre intimately linked to postmodernity. The following chapters try to examine this relation and propose a set of conventions that most commonly repeat in the oeuvre of Iraq War filmmakers.

This thesis offers five main chapters. The first, Background, presents an overview of the Gulf War and Iraq War's historical, social and cultural contexts, and examines these wars' postmodern nature. The remaining four chapters analyze Iraq War

films in the light of their own conventions and address the definition of a war film within the questions of particular historical events. They study the films in connection to their own specific subcategories, and emphasize how particular conventions relate to history and earlier representations of past wars. These subcategories focus on two main perspectives: the first takes place in the warzone, while the latter focuses on the homefront. Films set in the warzone highlight soldiers' and journalists' role in combat. The emphasis is here particularly centered on the new visual depictions of the warzone, introducing new filming techniques to better showcase the "new" reality of war. The second perspective discusses the homefront—focusing on the experience of war by those in the U.S.—and shows both traumatized soldiers (PTSD), the families of those soldiers, and attempts at preemptive (and preventive) war made by the CIA. And while the warzone is often represented using new cinematic tools, homefront films often employ classical Hollywood cinematic language, intimately connecting these films with the Western genre while also showcasing the postmodern war as happening in the "living rooms" and reiterating via media that America is in fact at war.

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND

*For September 11th, the exhilarating images of a major event; in the other [images of the Baghdad prisons], the degrading images of something that is the opposite of an event, a non-event of an obscene banality, the degradation, atrocious but banal, not only of the victims, but of the amateur scriptwriters of this parody of violence.*

*The worst is that it all becomes a parody of violence, a parody of the war itself, pornography becoming the ultimate form of the abjection of war which is unable to be simply war, to be simply about killing, and instead turns itself into a grotesque infantile reality-show, in a desperate simulacrum of power.*

Jean Baudrillard (2005: 206)

The 1980s were the time of proliferation of memory, increased access to information and the beginning of what Baudrillard later coined as simulation of life. One of his claims was dedicated to the subject of war. In *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981) he argued that war, like any other real event, would not upset the balance of power anymore: “(t)he balance of terror is the terror of balance.” For Baudrillard the USA did not lose the war in Vietnam arguing that it was a “crucial episode in a peaceful coexistence” that convinced China not to intervene, and when this objective was fulfilled the war “spontaneously” ended. The political message was that Vietnam was stabilized and that even the communist order “could be trusted.” This all meant to Baudrillard that war, as it was considered before, ceased to exist. He claimed that it has merely become its own simulacrum, that there were no more real opponents or the ideological seriousness of war and no more clear-cut division between winning and

losing. What did exist, in fact, was the illusion of actuality and objectivity of the information:

All events are to be read in reverse, where one perceives (...) that all these things arrive too late, with an overdue history, a lagging spiral, that they have exhausted their meaning long in advance and only survive on an artificial effervescence of signs, that all these events follow on illogically from one another, with a total equanimity towards the greatest inconsistencies, with a profound indifference to their consequences (...) thus the whole newsreel of "the present" gives the sinister impression of kitsch, retro and porno all at the same time doubtless everyone knows this, and nobody really accepts it. (Baudrillard, 1983: 71-72)

Later on, in the aftermath of September 11 and the Abu Ghraib scandal, Baudrillard thought of these narratives, which media impose in terms of war, in the context of war pornography. He thought of pornography in similar terms to his simulation theory, seeing it merely as a simulacrum of sex. In his book dedicated to subject of sex in the times of porno titled *Seduction* (1990: 27-28) he referred to pornography as “the violence of sex neutralized” making sex “more real than the real.” What can be understood by war pornography, then, is war without fighting, transformed into promotion, speculation, marketing ploys, etc. It is war, nevertheless, existing in abundance of images, media commentaries and takes place in the living rooms satisfying those watching by neutralizing the conflict (similarly as pornography neutralizes sex). As the quotation above illustrates, this abundance of war images and commentaries often has a tendency to turn into parody. Parody and war should not be seen together for the simple reason that using a dead body as part of the spectacle is considered by many immoral, yet this “new” possibility of war and its execution partially ended up as a “grotesque infantile reality-show.” This happened due to two factors: one, the postmodern reality finally managed to inculcate itself in the minds of the people, and two, the war “as we know it” ceased to exist. The question then would follow: what is this new war? What is its nature? Is it heroic as in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949)? Is it cruel as in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)? Or is it something else entirely?

Because of the centrality of images to this new brand of warfare, the truth of its

experience has become less fixed, less certain. It is possible now for soldiers to take their own photographs and make them a part of their “new” digital experience. As Baudrillard suggested, these pictures have no distance, perception and judgment. It does not matter anymore why they are being reproduced or broadcasted, but that the sole importance lies in their omnipresence and the violence that they spread into all aspects of daily life. This omnipresence allows people to embrace the pornographic face of war and gives a sort of justice to the image: “those who live by the spectacle will die by the spectacle” (Baudrillard 2005: 208). What he meant was to say that now the simulacra possess power. The war is fought no longer only physically, in one sense, but also through those images. As Baudrillard emphasized, there was no fear of death for religious Iraqis (a claim that I do not necessarily agree with), so the way to destroy them was for Americans to humiliate them as in the controversial case of Abu Ghraib, where the young American soldiers tortured and abused the prisoners and took their own photographs of this cruelty. These pictures present Iraqis in all sorts of degrading positions: a group of naked men making a “human pyramid,” a group of men being forced to public masturbation, a corpse being put on display and laughed at, intimidating a naked man with dogs, etc. Although much attention was given to the main authorities (mainly Donald Rumsfeld and George Bush) rather than to the scapegoats (the U.S. soldiers on whom the government tried to put the blame on), who were merely the acting power of the government apparatus here, not much consideration was given to the question of why this ignominy played such a crucial role in the war. The films on Abu Ghraib such as the documentaries *Standard Operating Procedures* (2008), *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007) or even most recently a fiction film *Boys of Abu Ghraib* (2014) have tried to answer this question in various ways, and the actual footage of the “crime scenes,” or as they might be called “digital experience,”



participated in this cinematic retrieval of the soldiers' past actions using this pornographic face of war for the purpose of deciphering what is happening behind the scenes of these new "postmodern" wars.

Following my claim that the Iraq War is rooted in postmodernism, I want to shift the attention from this photographic simulacrum to something far more substantial: the ideologically produced essence of the Gulf War. Before making any analytical commentary, let me briefly reprise the history leading up to this war. When Iraq was at war with Iran in 1980-1988, U.S. policy mostly leaned toward Iraq (McAlister: 243). Aiming to avoid the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, for that decade, America made an uneasy alliance with Saddam Hussein. Motivated by a pathological desire to impose Ba'athist rule, defined by the will to unite the Arabs, Hussein attempted to dominate the oil-producing Gulf region starting with an attack on Kuwait for refusal to write off Iraq's debt, annexing it as an Iraq province. He misread what he thought was U.S. indifference to minor changes in the Iraq-Kuwait borders, and he did not expect retaliation of any sort (Allawi: 43). The U.S. directly responded by putting sanctions against Iraq and sent American troops to Saudi Arabia. As Melani McAlister (2005: 235) noted, it was the biggest military operation since WW2: more than 700,000 troops participated in operation Desert Storm. President George H.W. Bush admitted that the importance of bringing stability to Persian Gulf stemmed from the fact that the U.S. imported half of the oil from Kuwait and that the world's (i.e., the USA's) economic independence was at stake (McAlister: 236). The decision to invade Iraq was approved by the popular majority in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> and a broad coalition of nations. The war operation itself was seen as successful: the grand assault started on February 24 and the

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<sup>1</sup> According to a Gallup Poll, "Three-quarters of Americans approve of the decision to go to war with Iraq -- almost the same as the 79% who approved of the first Persian Gulf War as it got underway a little more than 12 years ago. (...) That's within three points of the 79% who approved of the nascent war on Iraq ("Operation Desert Storm") on the night of Jan. 16, 1991" (2003, Newport, Moore, Jones).

war was essentially over by the 28th. As McAlister elicits from the data, the number of Iraqi casualties varied from 100,000–150,000, including civilians who died as “war-inflicted damage;” and only three hundred Americans perished on the allies’ side (236-237).

McAlister notes how the war seemed televisual, with a postmodern aspect of immediacy in news coverage, yet strangely unreal as it coexisted in the living rooms of those watching news while actually taking place thousands of miles away (237). The associations that the reporting and political language of those in power brought were related to American exceptionalism, patriotism, nationality, framing the Middle East as in conflict with Israel and building a “New World Order” in America (George H.W. Bush after McAlister: 237). During the winter of 1990, not only the American troops in Saudi Arabia but also people in front of TVs were held in suspense, waiting for the action to begin. The war was, then, highly televisual, and operation Desert Storm proved to be the cherry on its top. The public could embrace the troops’ success, as the Gulf War turned out nothing like Vietnam. Critics have often disagreed with this propaganda of success, claiming that the historical and social context of the Gulf crisis often has been completely omitted. It has been argued, for instance, that the complexity of Arab relations and division of the land between the rich and poor has never been fair in the Gulf, and these issues should have been addressed by the Arabs themselves (Kamioka, 2001: 66). Despite that, the American soldiers were always portrayed in the western broadcasting as heroes and mass media managed to reinforce the public opinion for “supporting our [American] troops.” All of these, according to Nobuo Kamioka, led to thinking about the war in terms of supporting the troops rather than wondering why to support the war in the first place (66).

This criticism led to a serious academic dispute over whether the Gulf War was

in fact the first postmodern war. As McAlister noted, it was the first time “in which representation of the event was the event” (241). The war became commodified, starting with television, and then quickly spread to selling American flags, displaying bumper stickers, making humorous T-shirts, etc., which McAlister calls the actual experience of war for the public. Benedict Anderson argued in his *Imagined Communities* (1991) that nations, at first, emerged from fundamental cultural conceptions: shared language, religion, a monarch who had the divine privilege, and the notion of temporality (cosmology and history being indistinguishable) (36). All these fundamental conceptions, however, underwent a decline brought by the impact of economic change. Capitalism and consumer culture changed the way people thought about themselves and their identities. What Walter Benjamin called the age of mechanical reproduction constructed the new system of referentials, where the simulation of original experience became more “real” than the actual aura of the occurrence, and in the context of this thesis, of war. Consequently, the Gulf War and the televisual show that accompanied it were not only a consumer enterprise, but also a postmodern attempt at building a sense of nationality.

One of the observers of this show was Jean Baudrillard, who within three months published three articles provocatively titled “The Gulf War will not take place,” “The Gulf War: is it really taking place?” and “The Gulf War did not take place.” Setting aside postmodernism and reiterating the thousands of casualties, there is something substantially wrong in calling such war non-existent, even as a rhetorical strategy. Those people did not die in an accident or a terroristic attack, but during the war, and again, as McAlister noted, they were essentially treated as “war-inflicted damage.” Whatever the case, Baudrillard’s core argument maintains that the Gulf War was a pre-programmed military machine, and that the technological advances in

weaponry aided by the media coverage changed the course of war by itself. The Gulf War thus witnessed the birth of a new military apparatus that amalgamated the usage, production and circulation of war images that could help assign and direct the actions of actual soldiers and machines. Qualitatively, then, it was a totally different kind of war compared to WW2 and Vietnam.

1990s were intoxicating times for Iraq with lots of attention coming from the USA, and other Western and Arab countries. Ba'athist Iraq experienced a strengthening of tribal traditions, which was a problem for Islamic rulers such as ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, who tried to impose illegal Sharia courts all over the country, and who was not afraid of issuing fatwas for the purpose of abolishing these tribal customs. It was a decade of growing impatience between Sunni and Shi'a Islamists, fighting with the Kurdish separatists, falling incomes and collapse of the middle classes. This resulted in "the mass exodus of professionals – engineers, doctors, administrators" from Iraq to neighboring Jordan, Libya and Yemen (Allawi: 128). For those who stayed, the regime prepared escalation of conservatism and forced women<sup>2</sup> to stay at home, wearing hijab in even greater numbers, and keeping them from pursuing independent careers. Afraid of losing power to jihadists and plagued by the possibility of a civil war, Saddam ordered to kill al-Sadr in 1999. Iraq was in a difficult spot and was becoming a land of terror(ism).

For the United States, the 1990s were the years of reminding the Arab community of its assimilationist imperative (McAlister: 257). The brotherhood of multicultural American soldiers during the Gulf War shown in many media

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<sup>2</sup> Because of the high unemployment the jobs were primarily given to men. The women had to stay at home, which was also becoming more difficult as some husbands simply left the country, or else they died in one of Saddam Hussein's wars or by getting murdered. This resulted in many women entering prostitution, a frightening and risky option in religious Iraq. (Allawi: 129-130)

representations imposed on the viewers in everyday news reporting resulted in recognizing the USA as superior empire to more heterogeneous and less liberal other nations “particularly those in the Middle East” (McAlister: 259). This newly found multicultural power resulted in spreading much enthusiasm towards the racial diversity (still mainly framed in the discourse of white/black race relations). During the Super Bowl XXV in 1991, instead of the usual halftime entertainment, ABC channel displayed images of African Americans, Native Americans and white Americans fighting all together (thus still overlooking the Latinos, Asians and Arabs). Colin Powell became the symbol of multiculturalism at home and the New World Order abroad (McAlister: 253). Yet despite this ideological promotion of diversity, America did not come to appreciate the Arabs, and hence the 1990s resulted in Muslims epitomizing the threat of terrorism.

When on September 11, 2001 two planes hit the Twin Towers, followed by an attack on Pentagon and a downed plane in Pennsylvania, national trauma broke through the illusion of peace that many Americans may have been living (Kaplan, 2005: 15). It seemed as if fictional heroes such as Denzel Washington or Bruce Willis could not really help, that the CIA and FBI were in fact useless. As Kaplan suggested, the USA was humiliated by the terrorists’ success (16). By broadcasting the attack over and over on TV, the media seemingly made the planes hit the towers each time again and saturated the public with images of the events. Although Kaplan does not recognize this postmodern aspect of the media reporting, it is vital to consider the role that TV played in suffusing the trauma.

Right after 9/11 many noticed that television took on a more “serious” tone and evoked American exceptionalism in the form of nostalgia. On TV,<sup>3</sup> this nostalgia led

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<sup>3</sup> I refer here to Lynn Spiegel’s article “Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11” (2004).

to reruns of old shows and films about WW2, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Kennedy assassination, and other notable traumatic events in the U.S. history; everything was, of course, situated in the context of American uniqueness. On top of that, some channels showed documentaries that showcased the dissonance between the Westerner and the Other in a form of pedagogic lesson (e.g. *Beneath the Veil* [2001], *Unholy War* [2001]). 9/11 managed to disrupt everyday life and create a narrative that used the old wars' material for comforting the viewers—the USA has survived trauma before (Pearl Harbor, presidential assassination, Vietnam)—and can find a way to do it again, resulting in the media prolonging the disruption of everyday.

As Baudrillard said “(s)imulation is master, and nostalgia, the phantasmal parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials, alone remain.” When there is no more “real,” nostalgia assumes its meaning. The nostalgia that the TV produced after 9/11 attacks centered on the notion of patriotism, calling for unity and fight against terrorism. On some level, this disruption of everyday simulated life, indeed broke people from a state of illusionary haze that Kaplan identifies, but as many philosophers interested in the sociology of everyday life (e.g. Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, John Fiske) have observed, this disruption reasserted the everyday in contrast to what had disrupted it. Media have become a part of lived experience and as such they have become invisible, disappearing from people's consciousness, as the news reporting became immediate. It was this reenacted nostalgia, then, that on one level proliferated the threats and on the other asserted that the normal order can be restored.

Although at first Americans were perplexed and unsure how to respond to the attack (McAlister: 267), with cultural imagery bringing out the heroism, patriotism, and strength, soon they started debating possible retaliation. After the enemy was identified as the militant Islamic organization al-Qaeda, led by the extremist Osama bin Laden,

the media intensified its reporting to levels similar to those seen in the Gulf War (McAlister: 276). After a tape with bin Laden was made public on 7<sup>th</sup> October, including information that he was hiding in Afghanistan, the USA declared war on the place of his asylum. A month later, in November 2001, George W. Bush ordered Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to start preparing an attack on Iraq, accusing it along with Afghanistan of sponsoring the terrorists. In his speech that month, he spoke to the United Nations General Assembly:

As I've told the American people, freedom and fear are at war. We face enemies that hate not our policies, but our existence; the tolerance of openness and creative culture that defines us. But the outcome of this conflict is certain: There is a current in history and it runs toward freedom. Our enemies resent it and dismiss it, but the dreams of mankind are defined by liberty — the natural right to create and build and worship and live in dignity. When men and women are released from oppression and isolation, they find fulfillment and hope, and they leave poverty by the millions.

Bush addressed the need to fight against terrorists, proclaiming an international “war on terror.” He maintained that the liberal politics and lifestyle of American citizens were the main reason for terrorists’ hatred. His dialectic was much in line with what McAlister noted about the USA seeing itself as superior to other countries due to its multicultural, liberal power. In 2003 when America started the strike on Iraq, the politics had shifted from retaliation to the removal of Saddam Hussein, who, at this point, was suspected of holding dangerous weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that would endanger not only Americans, but also Arabs. During a speech in March 2003, president Bush said:

We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens, for their great civilization and for the religious faiths they practice. We have no ambition in Iraq, except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people.

Thus, the 9/11 attacks framed the War on Terror in the discourse of retaliation and bringing “freedom” to the Iraqis, making the Iraq War much more “personal” than the Gulf War. And just as the hopes were for it to be another “good war,” the governmental lies about the threats, stories of waterboarding and collateral damage

soon managed to fatigue Americans. And while the reasons of Middle Easterners' hatred towards the West were linked to the decades of exploitation and maltreatment with nothing in return, the U.S. response that basically urged to normalize savagery in these regions only resulted in the further cycle of violence that proliferated the needs for terrorism and aggression in both sides of the conflict that can be seen until this day (2014) (Baudrillard, 2003: 98-101).

Although the war in Iraq officially ended in December 2011, peace was not entirely restored in the area; jihadist groups—one of them al-Qaeda—claimed the land, aiming to turn it into a caliphate of The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. American troops have not yet withdrawn their presence from Afghanistan, where they have been “fighting” against terror since 2001. Overall then, the “war on terror” is not finished, as the U.S. media conceded that in fact it may *never* be finished, and the case of Iraq as being “saved” seem dubious in the light of recent events happening in the area since the jihadists usurpation of power.

The trauma and desire for retaliation caused by the attacks of 9/11 stayed a major motor for continuing the war on terror. When it seems that the war has reached the end of its course, the terrorists use techniques very similar to those in Western media in order to heat up the situation once again; for instance, the jihadist usurpers in Iraq and Syria take photos and videos of beheadings and share them on Twitter and YouTube. This war, happening on the screen and becoming the mere image of itself, reaches the imaginations of much greater numbers of people than it did in case of the previous wars. Because social media bypasses the intermediary of television, access to these inflammatory media texts is much more immediate, without any mediation from a third party's influence or commentary.

The Iraq War shares many qualities of the Gulf War. The postmodern features



of the latter, such as media saturation of war reporting and the obfuscation of the real, have impacted the war film genre completely. The handful of Gulf War films produced in the 1990s until the mid-2000s have outlined the major generic features that unrel for the Iraq War films. The first ones, however, underline how the war was a non-event often parodying it, while the latter ones, due to more personal character of the war, and its bloodier nature, tend to have gloomier atmosphere. And while the Gulf War representations in films often evoke the postmodern character of the war in all aspects (showing simulational combat, the postmodern influence on journalism, and experiencing the war in the “living room”), the Iraq War films show how the combat is affected by postmodern visibility, how the journalists contribute to the creation of war in mass imagery and how the experience of re-living the war at home impacts the understanding of national trauma. Especially in case of the latter one—the homefront experience—the postmodern nature of war is present rather in narratives than in visual aspects as in cases of warzone experiences, and the filmmakers dealing with the situation at home during the war often tend to turn to more classical and linear filmmaking.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE WAR EXPERIENCE

#### 3.1 Soldiers in World War II and Vietnam: the foundations of generic conventions

Steve Fore claimed in 1984 that the war movie was an “unwanted stepchild in the context of the literature of the American cinema’s family of genres” (40), and although nearly two decades passed since Fore published his article, the war films are still a feeble area of study. Every genre, and so the war film, needs oppositional forces, set of values, culturally derived meanings of events and dominant ideology. And to define what a particular “genre” is, one needs to point out a set of repeating and recurring conventions that would be understood as identifiable for its viewers. These conventions may be reliant on sociocultural changes: just as WW2, Vietnam and Iraq films belong to the broader category of a war film, they may include new conventions that with time establish new meaning (for example the victimization of Jews in WW2 films of 1980-1990s changed into heroization of Jews in the 2000s [e.g. *Defiance*, 2008] or treatment of Nazis as cruel savages changed into humanizing Germans [e.g. *Schindler’s List*, 1993]).

As for the war film genre in general, its conventions include single identifiable male hero interacting with a wider group of soldiers and entering into a conflict with them, bonding, violent fighting with the enemy (Nazis/Japs/Commies/Hajis), celebration of machismo (war is agony, but it is exhilarating), sacrifice bringing moral catharsis and placing the action in the historical setting. Robert Eberwein noted that “[u]nlike other genres such as Westerns or gangster films, films about war have their roots in this specific, identifiable historical event” (7). This event is necessarily related to proclamation of war and its demand to be seen on screen. These are the audiences, in fact, that manufacture this demand as war films play significant role in explaining the conflict, neutralizing threats, educating and helping to deal with the trauma.

The subject of war is necessarily related to the bravery and discipline of a soldier. When speaking of wars such as the Iraq War and pondering on its international character, the figure of a Marine best represents American service members, since the main aim for founding the military branch known as the Marines in 1775 was to execute the U.S. international policies. The Marines, then, were to fight mainly abroad, which they have in places like Japan, Vietnam, and Iraq. It is also a military branch with a strong cultural mythology that has permeated the popular imagination; the privileged, selective and voluntary character of these troops makes them the most cultish of the American armed forces.

Marines have been featured in a number of WW2 films and were often used in purpose of evoking war-nostalgia that would later on, especially in most recent WW2 films, be connected to the notion of the “good war.” While the first three years after the end of WW2 were not as proliferate for the WW2 film genre as decade afterwards, they helped to build up the concept of a national hero. In the 1950s, the main purpose of cultivating this WW2 nostalgia was to unite the increasing fragmentation of the U.S.

identity. The postwar era was difficult, and the WW2 films helped to understand and evaluate the Cold War along with such concepts as capitalism and race relations. Despite this attempt to grasp the new postwar reality, it would be an oversimplification to say that the WW2 films had only positive messages about American participation in the war. Many films, such as *The Caine Mutiny* (1954), questioned the destructive result of war on men, while others, such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), casted doubt on war's effectiveness.

The early Hollywood movies that featured Marines were often blending many genres, attempting to attract as wide an audience as possible (war—for men, romance—for women). Especially the early WW2 films, which were amalgamations of Western, romance, combat, comedy, etc., let the contemporary understanding of war genre slowly establish itself through these initial generic combinations. Consequently, many war films had mixed narratives, for example a love story between a Marine and a nurse (*Tell it to the Marines* [1926]), a singularly tough woman (*Pride of the Marines* [1945]), or amorous dalliances and indigenous girls (*Marines, Let's Go* [1961]). These films tended to portray Marines in very stereotypical way (overconfident, juvenile, bloodthirsty) and often ignored the serious aspects of war diverging into more entertaining part and describing soldier's love life. Besides these love-focused films, combat films that depicted Marines as both heroic (eager to sacrifice themselves for the country) and yet exploited by the government (as shown in early WW2 PTSD films) occupied another dominant position, showing soldiers as tough loners, patriotic heroes, and men who had something to prove.

Though the WW2 film genre as a whole (including both homefront and warzone experiences) was often mixing many narratives, with time the understanding of a combat genre became more focused on the soldier's experience. As Jeanine Basinger

notes, the elements of the combat genre included various frequent references to the military (showing insignia, flag, military songs, etc.), group of men with important military objective, indicated enemy's presence, and a climatic cinematic battle (1986: 73-75).

An example of a WW2 film that would both discuss the generic mixing of the war film genre, and encapsulating the combat experience that Basinger wrote about, would be a camp-to-combat film. One of the best-known films with such structure is *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), a prototypical WW2 combat film, featuring the ruggedly masculine John Wayne. Directed by Allan Dwan, a versatile director who made over 400 films of drastically varied genres, *Sands* takes advantage of its creator's generic flexibility (unlike the contemporary directors who are often associated with a specific genre). As an early WW2 film, representing what Basinger called a first wave combat film,<sup>1</sup> it has a prominent romantic subplot and yet tells a story of a rifle squad of Marines dedicating plenty of attention to the battle of Iwo Jima (being the climatic battle of the film). The film starts off showing the Semper Fidelis insignia and playing the Marine Hymn, using thus the Marine myth in its cinematic representation. If that was not enough, the film also uses veterans in the cast, and the opening credits dedicate the film to the U.S. Marine Corps. Basinger called this introduction "overkill" (164) for the purposes of bringing a more realistic tone to the movie. The main character of the film is sergeant Stryker (John Wayne), a trainer who treats his soldiers with the sort of tough love that is supposed to prepare them for the horrors of the war. The training itself looks harsh, but does not show distraught, drained, or exhausted soldiers on the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jeanine Basinger first wave of combat films have a time span from the beginning of the WW2 to 1943. These were the years when the very definition of the combat film was established. Despite the fact that *Sands of Iwo Jima* was made in 1949, in times of second wave war films, it has much more characteristics of the first wave combat films, those being: treating about the real event, making the events seem alive and personal to the viewer, whom they also educate about the war and combat process enacting patriotism and desire to win the war. (Basinger, 1986: 17-18, 122-123).

verge of psychological distress as later films do (e.g.: *Lone Survivor* [2013]). The future Marines in *Sands* seem to share a common animosity towards Stryker, who “probably got the regulations tattooed on his front and back,” but they know that his harsh ways are for their own good.

When it comes to characters in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, Dwan presents an ethnic, socioeconomic and personality mix of soldiers that is typical for the war film genre. There is, thus, an immigrant, George Hellenpolis, two brothers that always fight (beating each other up equals brotherly love), an arrogant intellectual, Peter Conway (John Agar), who sees himself as a “civilian” (going to war is more of a tradition for him – he repeatedly adds that he enlisted only due to his family’s ties with the Marines) rather than a Marine; a clumsy soldier, and an angry, bloodthirsty one, who has issues dealing with the power structure. The convention of these characters draws on to the established formula of a combat war film: as Basinger notes, there needs to be a father figure (Stryker/Wayne), the hero (Conway/Agar), the hero’s adversary (Wayne), the noble sacrifice (Wayne), the old man (Wayne) versus the youth (trained Marines), the immigrant representative (Hellenpolis/Coe), the comedy relief (brothers), the peace lover (Agar). This characters’ convention still remains valid for many films that speak in a trite way about war, and even if they do not, this formula still proves successful for many contemporary war films.

“Saddle up” repeats John Wayne’s character connecting the war film genre to Western movie. Just as Wayne himself, his character is the epitome of masculinity, of strength and authority. The training he executes ends up in a battlefield, leading to a difficult situation and his accidental death. It makes other soldiers, especially Peter Conway, realize that men such as Stryker are necessary for times of war, although Conway concedes an even greater need to avoid war at all costs, as war destroys

families. Just as it happened to Stryker's family, it could have happened to Conway's. As Basinger concluded, the most significant postwar message of *Sands* is the importance of family (166). Despite, then, Stryker's death being rather meaningless for the course of war, he manages to unite the other soldiers and appoint Conway his successor (sacrifice for bonding). Thus, the film made Wayne's character ambivalent: on one hand he is tough, incapable of love and giving up the army for his family, and on the other, he acts very righteously. There is a need for Stryker in the times of war, but no place for him in peacetime.

*Sands of Iwo Jima* portrays soldiers in an overall positive way that is very conventional for the first wave combat films. The soldiers are the heroes of war, and America should be proud of them. Through this process of heroization, the death of Stryker does not seem horrible; it becomes conflated with the notions of freedom, patriotism and bravery. The harsh training of the Marines in *Sands* makes sense for the purpose of the future battle, for without it the soldiers would have failed. The war is brutal and merciless, thus the sacrifice is necessary.

Apart from the subject of war, and yet going into the details of *Sands of Iwo Jima* as a film belonging to combat genre, it is a valid question to ask about its connotations with Western. Knowing that the genres always mix and change their functions along with the set of their features, it is interesting to realize how Western genre came from crime/melodrama and incorporated its conventions to the war film. The very persona of John Wayne in *Sands* give the film a strong Western feel as the cowboy roles Wayne used to perform (and would perform in the 1950s) were of characters that seemed rather violent, attractive, strong and tended to vilify the other, which in case of Westerns used to be the Native Americans (in *Sands* the Vietnamese).

Clearly the success of “cowboy” films inspired the war films to use much of the framework that occurs in Westerns.

The WW2 film, then, contributed largely to the development and understanding of the war film in general. It used the genre features of the Westerns, and yet it extended its definition to a larger notion of what combat and action are. Soon afterwards the military realized the potential of the war film as a recruiting tool and often willingly helped the film producers by providing documentary footage of fighting as in cases of *Sands, Task Force* (1949), *Go for Broke!* (1951), and many others. Real stories and incidents from the lives of soldiers often provided plots, giving the genre proximity and appeal. Although nowadays the usage of documentary excerpts is not as common, war filmmakers still use the “true story” ploy as the main engine of the film (e.g. *Lone Survivor*, *Redacted*, *Zero Dark Thirty*).

Like WW2 films, Vietnam War films are rooted in the historical event of war itself. Recognizing how the WW2 films came to life one can consequently assume that the Vietnam War films similarly tried to understand and negotiate the experience of this particular war. While many WW2 films worked as a propaganda tool in shaping national identity with the notion of patriotism and heroism in supporting the war, Vietnam War films complicated this binary relationship of ideological functions that a war film was supposed to execute. During the Vietnam War not many films were made that spoke of the event; one exception, *The Green Berets* (1968) with John Wayne, was not well-received, and met plenty of harsh critique for equalizing the war film with the Western. As Roger Ebert argued,

It is offensive not only to those who oppose American policy but even to those who support it. At this moment in our history, locked in the longest and one of the most controversial wars we have ever fought, what we certainly do not need is a movie depicting Vietnam in terms of cowboys and Indians. That is cruel and dishonest and unworthy of the thousands who have died there.  
(<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-green-berets-1968>)

However, after the war, especially in the late 1970s and 1980s, plenty of Vietnam films



came to take various standpoints in the subject of war. It is hard to define how many of them were directly anti-war and how many supported it, as this question somewhat lost on significance within certain demographics. The films spoke of the violence of war itself, of the human evil and the absurdity of fighting rather than focusing on taking a clear political stance, e.g. *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Platoon* (1986).

According to Michael Anderegg, Vietnam was “the most visually represented war in history, existing, to a great degree, as moving image, as the site of a specific and complex iconic cluster” turning the war into “a television event, a tragic serial drama stretched over thousands of nights in the American consciousness” (1991: 2). For Anderegg, the representations of Vietnam in film and television have become the most visually and “aurally” present documents of war, mainly as they were perceived by viewers as cultural events and intellectual statements rather than just movies (4). These standpoints of seeing the Vietnam experience as most “visually and aurally present” cannot be seen without controversy now, considering the degree in which the Gulf War managed to turn the actual war into a televisual event that was reported live. Nevertheless, this dispute is trying to prove that there had been a change in understanding and treatment of war film after Vietnam brought something new to the visual reconstruction of war memory.

The changes between WW2 films and Vietnam films are illustrated in one of the most recognizable films from the time: Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (*FMJ*, 1987). On the one hand, it shares a combat film paradigm with the WW2 films, especially the camp-into-combat structure also observed in *Sands*, and on the other, it satirizes the genre it is trying to emulate. *Full Metal Jacket* shares a certain set of motifs, narrative patterns and thematic concerns that are common for what is now associated

generally with the Vietnam War cinema (Doherty, 1988: 24). For Thomas Doherty *FMJ* is undoubtedly fixed in the earlier conventions of combat films, so much that he sees these blood ties running “deeper than the usual anxiety of generic influence” (25). As much as these conventions overlap, however, Kubrick’s cynical depiction of war is in keeping with his earlier films, such as *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). While in *Sands* death during the war is seen as something courageous (it was admirable to think about Stryker and his Marines trying to set the American flag in Iwo Jima’s soil), Kubrick debunks this kind of war heroism by presenting characters who try to cope with the war in a less idealized way: they swear, they smoke, they spit, they “fuck.” *FMJ* also discusses the corrupted war bureaucracy (Joker cannot file his report without putting a prospective “kill” in it), identity transformation (soldiers are nicknamed “Mother,” “Joker,” “Cowboy”), and as Doherty underlined, a very specific language, that is “homophobic, misogynistic, sado-masochistic, racist and exuberantly poetic” (26).

The main character of *FMJ* is Private J.T. Davis (Matthew Modine), a complicated man who wears a peace sign during the war and is nicknamed Joker by drill sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey). Like Peter Conway in *Sands*, Joker questions the war, and becomes a dynamic character who, at first, enlists in the army with the wish to see combat, and then, referring sarcastically to army’s need to put a “kill” in his war reports, wears a helmet engraved with “born to kill,” a cynical reference to the training’s goal of turning soldiers into killing machines. This questioning of war is much different than in *Sands*, as the commemoration of battles that happened during WW2 operates in a very different sociopolitical context. Just as Vietnam is often seen by the public as an unnecessarily long endeavor that ended in failure, WW2 is seen as a victory of American troops over the enemy that helped to change the total outcome of war for all the allies of the USA (hence the abundance of the Holocaust memorials

shaping American liberal identity). Although the latter had its morale brought down, too, by the dropping of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, most of the WW2 films fail to acknowledge these attacks (since 1990s there was no American-produced film treating directly about this subject) and focus on the combat aspects of the war. In regards to film conventions it comes out clear that even if Hollywood is still making WW2 films, even more so than the Vietnam films (last U.S. productions of Vietnam films were made in 2007), there are yet plenty of taboo subjects related to this war that cinema has left largely unexplored. Conway saves his family and hopes for future peace, but at the time of the battle he fulfills his patriotic duties at the front. Realizing these patriotic duties is not as virtuous in the context of the Vietnam War, but the soldiers justify their actions by trying to prevent any future war (quoting “Hello Vietnam” song: “We must stop communism in that land/Or freedom will start slipping through our hands”), thus doing exactly what Conway hoped for (preventive rather than preemptive war), but in a violent way through combat.

*Full Metal Jacket* establishes a clear division between boot camp and actual fighting. Both could even be watched in terms of different stories, as the first part focuses on the character of private Leonard “Gomer Pyle”<sup>2</sup> Lawrence (Vincent D’Onofrio) rather than fully concentrating on private Joker. Pyle is the group’s loser, an overweight and inept recruit who becomes the victim of jokes and hatred inflamed by Sergeant Hartman. Unlike Stryker in *Sands*, Hartman is one-dimensional, existing for encouraging discipline among the recruits. In his opening speech he says:

“From now on you will speak only when spoken to, and the first and last words out of your filthy sewers will be «Sir». Do you maggots understand that? (...) If you ladies leave my island, if you survive recruit training, you will be a weapon. You will be a minister of death praying for war. (...) You are the lowest form of life on Earth. You are not even human fucking beings. You are nothing but unorganized grabastic pieces of amphibian shit!

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<sup>2</sup> The character of Gomer Pyle refers to the eponymous sitcom, which aired between 1964-1969 and featured a naive and candid Marine, who offered comic relief in the story of US Marine Corps. Clearly, treatment of Leonard Lawrence as Gomer Pyle was meant to diminish his role in the military and made him an object of jokes to Sergeant Hartman.

Because I am hard, you will not like me. But the more you hate me, the more you will learn. I am hard but I am fair. There is no racial bigotry here. I do not look down on niggers, kikes, wops or greasers. Here you are all equally worthless. And my orders are to weed out all non-hackers who do not pack the gear to serve in my beloved Corps. Do you maggots understand that?"

In this speech Hartman explains the power structure in which the privates are as low as maggots. This would be the first part of their transformation: the dehumanization. The soldiers, thus, need to forget who they were before in order to be successfully transformed into Marines.

Hartman, like Stryker, is aware that his group will not like him, he wants them to hate him, as that would be "educational" for them. When Hartman is, right after making his short introductory speech, nicknaming the soldiers, Matthew Modine's character makes a clever and intertextual reference to John Wayne asking out loud "is that you John Wayne? Is this me?" (the scene is later repeated on the front between the soldiers and camera crew that takes footage in 'Nam – a truly interesting moment of breaking the fourth wall), which could be used as an allusion to Wayne's character in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. Despite Hartman and Stryker being both harsh leaders that act out as an "ultimate" masculine hero, Kubrick diminishes Hartman's character. Whereas Stryker's death takes place out on the front, the murder of Hartman reveals more failure not only for him personally, but for the system as a whole.

Both the WW2 film and Vietnam War film have helped to shape the understanding of the war film as a genre. The first set up the rules that were carried on later not only in Vietnam films, but also remained intrinsic to the genre throughout the decades (e.g. *Saving Private Ryan* [1998], *Fury* [2014]). The WW2 War film created an association in the viewer's mind between war and combat. For the purpose of using film as recruiting tool, encouraging patriotism and homogeneity, WW2 films often took advantage of war-documentary techniques, making sure the stories told in films were true. Just as *Sands* used real veterans in the cast, the WW2 film placed its bet on realist

style, unfolding the combatants' points of view and trying to showcase *how* the war was conducted rather than *why*. As Basinger noted, characters usually had to come from different backgrounds, "a democratic ethnic mix [...] of volunteers from several service branches who really have no other choice (the basic immigrant identification)" (1986: 61). This mix represented a microcosm of U.S. society. The Vietnam War films focused less on realism, working overtly with fiction such as *The Deer Hunter* (1979), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or *Platoon* (1986). As Anderegg said, "(c)inematic representations, in short, seem to have supplanted even so-called factual analyses as *the* discourse of the war, as the place where some kind of reckoning will need to be made and tested" (1991: 1). This claim, despite sounding very Baudrillardian, is not of course distinct for Vietnam War, as with the introduction of cinema and television, the visual representations of war entered the cultural memory, allowing the film makers to recreate the war to the masses. While each side of the conflict tends to claim its own right for fight, WW2 films usually build up sympathy for the U.S. soldiers, often polarizing the war to good/bad guys, even if the "good guys" are not always well intentioned or valorous. The Vietnam films, contrarily, often ignored taking a stand in selecting a repetitive pattern to make this choice, but they established certain set of motifs such as "feminization of the enemy, the demonization of the media and the valorization of patriarchy" (Anderegg: 8). *Full Metal Jacket* shares all these motifs with the Vietnam film, and, as all other Vietnam films, exists in a dialectical tension with WW2 films (Eberwein: 94) as losing soldiers' lives in the Vietnam films do not offer any compensation as the war does not end with the U.S. winning. Just as Eberwein explains, during WW2, the Americans killed Nazis, while soldiers in Vietnam ended up killing each other, resulting in Vietnam films changing "the nature of the war film genre" (96).

What Iraq War filmmakers were stepping into, then, was mediation between the 24/7 available documentary footage of the televised war and a constructed definition of a war film. What they ended up doing was to deconstruct the genre. Much of that happened due to the transformation of the war itself into a postmodern “spectacle,” and the U.S. government treatment of both the war and soldiers as mentioned in the previous chapter.

### **3.2 The Iraq War combat film: Elements of the genre**

The Iraq War film is then settled in the historical event of the conflict between the USA and Iraq. This conflict, similarly to the Gulf War, which was the Iraq War’s predecessor, is still quite recent and due to that the emerging conventions of this subgenre are still building up. All the filmmakers start their work with a story. Although there is no such thing yet that could be considered as a universal Iraq War combat film story, here are some features that repeat in many films (as influenced by Basinger’s own characterization):

**A group of men (Marines) with a military objective is stationed somewhere in Iraq** [Most commonly it is an ethnic and socioeconomic mix of different types. Some of the soldiers have no war experience and some have earlier been to the Gulf or Afghanistan. Their previous professions are not discussed like it often happened in other films; the soldiers who went to Iraq are there voluntarily unlike the ones in WW2 or Vietnam who were drafted. The volunteering soldiers are presented as a particular bunch of their generation, who go to war either for moral, patriotic motives (trauma after 9/11) or for fascination with killing and war (war being like a video game and killing being exciting).]

**The very beginning of the film questions the war's effectiveness** [Soldiers do not get to see any combat, which makes them jaded and scared; men question their very being in Iraq and the war's justification; feelings of futility in achieving anything in the attacked land.]

**There is a conflict between men** [Soldiers fight over who gets to have more fun, they criticize each other for having different morale/war/standpoint/experiences.]

**Soldiers undertake a mission** [They prepare to combat or go to look for the enemy/search the Iraqi houses/ defuse bombs/ look for insurgents.]

**The action is uneven, unfolds with time and then the soldiers' role is finished** [The soldiers are put in danger over and over again until the final situation that ends their purpose in the war – the war ends or they prove not to be worthy to be part of the army.]

**The enemy is invisible** [Perhaps this is the biggest difference between the Iraq and the earlier war films. The enemy is not an Iraqi, but a nameless, hidden insurgent, who sets bomb in his own land. It bares similarities with the Vietnam War, but while there the enemies were clearly marked as the Communists, Iraq War does not differentiate between a pro-American Iraqi and an anti-American Iraqi. The enemies are thus often confused with civilians.]

**The locals are portrayed in a way that calls for compassion** [Iraqis are presented as shepherds/families/civilians who struggle to keep their livelihood in the war. They may also be shown as incapable to defend themselves towards the American forces—they cannot fight back while they get attacked at night for a search neither can they communicate while asking for help or explaining what has happened to them.]

**Military iconography** [The soldiers wear camouflage patterns fitting their presence in the desert. They are usually shown in Humvees or tanks. They communicate with each

other using headsets unlike before with walkie-talkies. They carry weapons—rifles (M16, M110, M32, and mortars).]

**The situation is resolved** [Unlike in earlier war films, there is no death accompanied for the resolution of action: the soldiers either get sent back home or get arrested.]

**The new cinematic tools/forms are employed for tension** [All the Iraq combat films employ new techniques in trying to exhibit the “postmodern” reality of war—using variations of cameras (handheld, candid, long lenses), shooting from 360 degrees and getting different perspective on the event, making the action feel as if it is edited against the continuity rules (for the purpose of achieving new time perception), taking intimate close ups, and showing the explosions in the slow motion.]

This outline hints at the relationship of Iraq film with its genre in a very general way. The film’s position in it is established and now is ready to start undergoing evolution within its own category. This basic set of concepts can change according to the ideological standpoint that the film might acquire, as films come off always with some questions: who was the hero? Who was the enemy? How to deal with labeling the enemy in the multiethnic nation? Does a man change after such war? These questions always multiply with time, as the end of war brings a reflection on it.

My main argument here, however, is that the greatest change occurred in portraying the combat. WW2 inspired many filmmakers to display the war as if it was a cinematic feast. Battlefield, shown as a theater of war where soldiers crawl in the entrenchments and hear the explosions, starts to disappear. This slow vanishing of battlefield started in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Paul Virilio claimed that since the invention of optical telegraph in 1794 “the remotest battlefield could have an almost immediate impact on a country’s internal life, turning upside down its social, political and economic field” (46). The immediacy of action in distance only improved since then.



The technological progress produced in time/space compression era led to conflation of reality.

According to Virilio, after 1945 the war has become more visualized in films resulting in creating a new form of spectacle (48). This spectacle gave its viewers a chance to enter into a war simulator and immerse in the reality of war where they could feel like survivors of the battlefield. The war had no any real extension in space anymore, but in an endless mass of information (Virilio: 51). What happened to battlefield and the truth related to what is happening during combat turned nowadays to overexposure of live broadcast. Strategic bombing and concept of an information war (the Gulf War was the first war to be labeled as such) brought war homes, resulting in the possibility of mass spectators (and as Virilio said, by association, survivors). The combat, then, has become ultimately different: before the World War I the soldiers took part in the “theater of operations” and after WWI the tendency was to “narrow down targets and to create a picture of battle for troops blinded by the massive reach of artillery units” while using “multiplicity of trench periscopes, telescopic sights, sound detectors” ultimately diminishing the role of a soldier to that of an actor (Virilio: 70). Much of Virilio’s observations proved that both war and its representation essentially change with the usage of technology.

In his reflections on the Gulf War, Baudrillard disagreed with Virilio on the subject of time. Just as Virilio considered time to be revolutionized with the technological developments, Baudrillard thought of it rather in terms of “involution of real time” that made the real events disappear and be replaced by their virtual representations ultimately resulting in the absence of war (1995: 47-48). The truth turned into an illusion and the information lost its significance. It is this atmosphere of technological progress that combat is becoming a virtual battlefield and plunging

deeper into the simulation of real world that accompanies the Iraq War and its filmic representations.

### **3.3 The Gulf War and *Jarhead(s)* (2005)**

The first major film about the Gulf War was Edward Zwick's 1996 film *Courage Under Fire*. It focuses on two main characters: Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel Serling (Denzel Washington), and Captain Karen Emma Walden (Meg Ryan). Zwick's film is a good preamble to understanding the Gulf War films—which were largely ignored by the Hollywood industry, but appreciated by the feature TV movies. *Courage Under Fire* is exceptional in this sense, as it is a movie picture, but yet it is not very enlightening in explaining any aspect of the Gulf War itself. Just as the viewer can assume himself to be well informed in the subject of the combat actions that occurred during the Gulf War, the film offers a new approach to representation of combat that imitates some of the earlier conventions and allows the viewer to rediscover himself in this thriving new genre.

*Courage* begins with Serling trying to uncover the enemy tanks in his own lines, and while doing so he makes a mistake and orders to shoot his friend's tank. The army covers up Serling's misjudgment and confines him to deskwork. His first task is to investigate the legitimacy of bestowing the Medal of Honor posthumously to Captain Walden. Serling, seeking to make things right after his failure in the field, tries to make sure that he learns everything about the combat in which Walden died. For that purpose, Zwick fashioned his film to have a flashback structure—every time Serling interrogates someone about Walden's death, viewers get a new reconstruction of events, a narrative subjectivity that did not occur in earlier WW2 or Vietnam films.

Moreover, what makes *Courage* so distinctive is not only the renouncement of a linear plot, but the camera's attempt to capture the truth in regards to Iraq conflict (Eberwein: 126). This, of course, necessarily brings back the issue of how the war has been turned into a television show that feeds its viewers all the information needed for a well-rounded narrative that only together constitutes the "truth." Serling receives the Medal of Honor, but viewers learn that it was a wrong decision as he shot one of the tanks in his own command. On the other hand, even when it becomes known that Walden indeed deserves a medal, but that in fact she was betrayed by her own men and died in similar circumstances killed by "friendly" napalm attack, it still questions the legitimacy of war and the corrupted facts that the news agencies feed people with.

Walden is represented through soldiers' stories, and without exception, all of these stories are told by men. Despite Walden being the heroine, her image as such relies on others' memories and interpretations of events. This drama of a character, told from different angles, goes back to the subject of postmodern unreliability and the subjectivity of truth, which requires the mediation of different accounts to become accepted. As Richard Evans underlined, the postmodern loss of history became a menace to the whole area of studies (2007: 7), and the ambivalence of historical fact, which could be questioned, reinterpreted and retold became the major issue for the postmodern historians and academicians who spread doubt towards objectivity. Although the viewers of this postmodern war spectacle had visual access to the front and having the access to the real that was unmediated by the secondary reporting (they had firsthand access to what was happening in the warzone), they still should have distrusted the narratives and mechanisms that media set the information to them.

As the first major attempt at representing the Gulf War, *Courage* repeats many conventions of the war film and yet twists them to face the new reality of war. It tells a

story of combat heroism using characters from different ethnic backgrounds – African Americans, white Americans, a Latino, and a (white) woman. Like WW2 films, it reflects an idealized microcosm of American society, one that becomes even more emphasized due to changes in minority politics over the 1970s and 1980s (McAlister: 246). U.S. immigration quotas allowed entry to an increased number of people from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, decreasing the white majority from 90% in 1970 to 50% in 1990 (McAlister: 247). This resulted in the USA becoming even more multicultural, having the heterogeneous population of different races and ethnicities. All these administrative transformations affected the troops in the Gulf War, changing demographics that were considerably “whiter” during WW2 and the Vietnam War. As McAlister points out, Gulf War soldiers were “more racially diverse, older (...), more likely to be married, and better trained than the army of the 1970s” (251). 30% of active troops during the Desert Storm were black, and the army, when asked about the diversity responded “well, see, we just have soldiers” (McAlister: 252). This military multiculturalism and the increased presence of women became important for the U.S. politics of the 1990s constructing new national identity<sup>3</sup>, and, as McAlister noted, this new modern nationalism advantageously used the postmodern display of war for showcasing the America’s superiority (259).

As the first major film about the Iraq War, *Courage* laid down many new conventions that were to follow, including the death of an American soldier killed not at the front, but from within U.S. ranks. Most Iraq films dealing with war experience do not show Americans killed by the enemy, but by friendly fire/conflict/ignorance of danger. No other Iraq film features a woman soldier at the front, but the character of

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<sup>3</sup> Even though the USA has bet on “multiculturalism” since its foundation, it was a mix of white nations accumulating Irish, British, German, Swedish, and so on.

Karen Walden becomes symbolic for the experience of uncovering the truth about the hyperreality of war and the military's lies. Especially the latter one will be featured in plenty of the Iraq War films (*Redacted* [2007], *Green Zone* [2010], *In the Valley of Elah* [2007]).

Another film that unveils the Gulf War experience for the soldiers who spent months anticipating the attack on Iraq is Sam Mendes' *Jarhead* (2005) based on Anthony Swofford's war memoir. Unlike *Courage*, it focuses on the troops' experiences rather than singular combat story. While waiting for Saddam Hussein's withdrawal from Kuwait, U.S. forces gradually assembled their troops in Saudi Arabia. When people watched the saturated media coverage of preparations for Desert Storm, the soldiers fought the monotony of life in the desert and their own impatience to shoot some "Haji motherfuckers." *Jarhead* illustrates the Gulf War, and along with Zwick's *Courage*, it determines what postmodern elements would shift the conventions of the war film to represent combat in Iraq.

In *Jarhead* Mendes took a similar approach to Kubrick's in *Full Metal Jacket*. What *FMJ* did for Vietnam in terms of showing story from camp to combat, *Jarhead* did for the Gulf War. Expanding on the similarities between *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *Full Metal Jacket* when it comes to the plot structure, characters and the combat scenes, *Jarhead* is more overtly intertextually savvy, alluding to *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986) and most of all to *Full Metal Jacket*, the locus of its intertextual tapestry.

*Jarhead*, like in the previously discussed films, has for its protagonist a new recruit, Anthony Swofford (Jake Gyllenhaal), surrounded by his partner Alan Troy (Peter Sarsgaard), Drill Instructor Fitch, Staff Sergeant Sykes and, like in *Courage*, a group of ethnically mixed soldiers. Their motives for joining the army are not as noble

as those shown in *Sands*; some of the soldiers in *Jarhead* have apparently volunteered in order to avoid prison sentences. U.S. Marine Corps seems like a bad idea to Swofford after meeting Fitch and hearing the way he speaks to the recruits (revealing his similarly to Conway and Joker). Comparing the training in *Jarhead* with *Sands* and *FMJ*, there should not be anything to surprise Swofford especially with his knowledge about the military life (in his book Swofford makes lots of references to earlier films). The way Fitch refers to the recruits (maggots), insults them by suggesting homosexuality, beats them (“love taps,” as in brotherly love<sup>4</sup>), and gives them a hard time, bears lots of similarities to Hartman’s treatment in *FMJ*.

Idleness of the Marines during the Gulf War intensifies *FMJ* the soldiers are shown dealing with their sexual frustrations by hiring Vietnamese prostitutes, and developing a split in their personality that allows them to detach themselves from feelings of love, loneliness, pain, and boredom, while absorbing themselves in inanity of sex. This inanity for “jarheads” in the Gulf War makes them engage in masturbation (repeatedly mentioned by Swofford rather than depicted), consequently giving symbolical power to their hands, which are already more powerful as they serve as mechanical extension of a rifle.

Another convention of previous war films that *Jarhead* reverses is the depiction of death. In *Sands* death is a glorious moment with the body of John Wayne as a reminder of the sacrifice that soldiers make. In *FMJ* it is brutal, cruel and when it comes to killing the enemy, also a pleasure. Iraq War films abandon this notion of heroic and brutal death, marking it futile. In *FMJ* killing is related to dehumanization, naturalization of death and cruelty during the wartime and comes both from the harsh

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<sup>4</sup> These “love taps” also mention the homosocial hierarchy in the army, and allude to homoeroticity of the soldiers.

training and the atmosphere of mortality on the front. Then again, in *Jarhead*, this same training does not lead anywhere as brutal representing the war as a futile experience. This experience lacks demise and violence with which the “hypermasculine” men could unload their anger.

The relationship between the postmodern audiences and the postmodern soldiers is hinted in the scene where the soldiers themselves watch an imitation of the war in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and not the reality of it. If the life is indeed centralized on the virtual gaze then the new society constructs its past in a new relation between what is “simulated” and “real.” The soldiers in *Jarhead* are a part of this experience, of this strolling between moving images like the French flâneur. *Apocalypse Now* is yet another film about the Vietnam War that debunks the war as a heroic enterprise. However, presumably as a part of training and entertainment, the Marines cheer the fighting scenes as if they represented magnificent, exemplary combat. Mendes shows them watching a scene in which the American troops organize an airstrike on a Vietnamese village, a scene in which Coppola juxtaposes peaceful Vietnamese going about their day while the Marines in their helicopters listen to Wagner and shoot at them ruthlessly<sup>5</sup>. These images show that there is something fundamentally wrong in attacking a peaceful village, and yet in *Jarhead* the viewers see the Marines along with the main character, Swofford, shouting “shoot that motherfucker,” while seeing a Vietnamese woman trying to get schoolgirls to safety. Proving that the lure of weaponry, the soldiers’ mentality, and the usage of Wagner’s opera has changed little (if at all) since *Apocalypse Now*, Mendes emphasizes how this

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<sup>5</sup> The soldiers listen to *The Ride of the Valkyries*, a part of Wagner’s *Die Walküre*, a libretto dedicated to the subject of Valkyries – mythological figures who decide about which soldiers survive and which die during the war. During *The Ride of the Valkyries*, the women take the fallen soldiers.

virtual gaze takes the place of the “real” and how the jarheads experience an uncomplicated identification with the soldiers in Coppola’s film.

The early 1940s and 1950s films featuring Marines used to celebrate the hardships of the soldiers’ new positions, but the later Vietnam and Iraq films focused on the demystification of the Marine as a sacrificial hero. The soldiers in *Sands* are young and inexperienced, and it is a waste for their families and nation to lose them, but their sacrifice is necessary to save the homeland. Then, in *FMJ*, the viewer sees this dehumanizing treatment of soldiers as meat to be wasted in the battlefield. The most visible change, then, comes with *Jarhead*. First of all, the film emphasizes the existence of these men not as soldiers but as people. Hot branding, ex-cons, vividly sexual language and silly situations diminish the authority of the army (showing the Marines playing football and suddenly doing the striptease and demonstrating the “field sex” to please the journalists and get back at their superior) prove that the Marines are not a heroic bunch, but rather a random mixture of kids from all backgrounds. The lighter mood of the film, the amount of comic relief and then, finally, the reality of the war that they are part of, put their training and their purpose in Saudi Arabia into question. This way the Iraq camp-to-combat film, as exemplified by *Jarhead*, balances on the very same practices as shown in WW2 and Vietnam films for the training of the soldiers, on them learning the exact same things about themselves and “the other”—the enemy, and finally on the combat practices that no longer can portray the same action and gallantry.

To further understand what makes the Gulf War different from preceding conflicts, one can look at the “war scenes” in *Jarhead*. Instead of shooting at the enemy, soldiers organize “scorpions’ fights,” play football and beat each other up. The boredom, the heat, and the separation from their homeland make the Marines frantic



and jaded. After more than two months in the desert, Swofford's voice over narration explains this futility in the warzone:

Suggested techniques for the Marines to use in the avoidance of boredom and loneliness: masturbation, rereading of letters from unfaithful wives and girlfriends, cleaning your rifle, further masturbation, rewiring Walkman, arguing about religion and meaning of life, discussing in detail every woman the Marine has ever fucked, debating differences, such as Cuban versus Mexican, Harleys versus Hondas, left-versus right-handed masturbation, further cleaning of rifle, studying of Filipino mail-order bride catalog, further masturbation, planning of Marine's first meal on return home, imagining what the Marine's girlfriend and her man Jody are doing in the hay or in the alley, or in the hotel bed.

This inability of sexual fulfillment, right along with tantamount understanding of hand (holding rifle-being powerful) and phallus prove that Marines who are incapable of relieving the war-tension are useless in the warzone. The war thus might have been reported, might have even been "naked" for the observers, but it was not really "war," all the images were the filler taking place of the real just like these "techniques for the Marines" to avoid boredom.

One of the main arguments on the Gulf War reporting was that the TV made it look like a video game (McAlister: 240). The information was actually scarce, but the virtualization of war made the death of the soldier feel more redundant (Davis and Johnson: 135). It was more important to carry the ideological message of doing "what's right" by (ostensibly) protecting America's economic independence than to focus on the life of a single soldier. The battlefield is practically non-existent in any Gulf War film. There are actual combat scenes in *Courage*, but they are in such small portions that they seem to verify that the battle zone is absent. What the Gulf films do with the body, instead, is to weaponize it, to turn it into a machine. Bodies are thus usurped by military technologies, and ultimately, the soldiers also become the participating viewers of this virtual war: when Swofford and Troy are about to take their only shot during the war, the colonel stops them and forces them to watch an airstrike through the window. The window becomes the metaphor of the screen, and as Swofford watches the

“spectacular” show, so the viewers in their living rooms get the same image. The soldier is rendered unnecessary, the action is dehumanized and, as Baudrillard said, it becomes the hallucination of violence.

What the Gulf War brought to the understanding of “war” was a totally new way of executing the action and covering the event in the media. The new quality of war, now assumed to be bloodless, effective and fast, had the postmodern attributes of the present times. In many ways the Gulf War indeed “did not take place,” as it blurred the distinction between its simulation and reality, and yet it was a war, although one that was thoroughly unlike previous wars. Both Zwick and Mendes tried to capture these premises and open the way for them to constructing the new subgenre of the war film. Although *Courage* does not inform the viewers much about the war itself, it carries the postmodern doubt about the truth and refuses to showcase the enemy. *Jarhead* tries to picture the war by recycling and revising Vietnam film tropes, ultimately suggesting that despite being intensely covered in the news media, the Gulf War does not have its own war iconography. Perhaps then, just as the Gulf War “did not take place,” so the Gulf film did not really happen as the critics reluctantly failed to acknowledge the Gulf War film within its own subgenre.

### **3.4 The pornographic image and *Redacted* (2007)**

One of the first films about the Iraq War that shows the war experience is Brian de Palma’s *Redacted*, which visually documents imagined events before, during, and after a 2006 rape and murder in Samarra (2007). The film proposes new narrative form for a war genre, influenced by postmodern reality, as de Palma said “that nobody’s ever

seen on screen before” (Toro: 2007), characterized by linking French mock-documentary, fake journals and a variety of other candid-camera shots. If de Palma had *not* used this new narrative form to shoot his film, he would have essentially remade his 1989 film *Casualties of War*. Relying on the same characters from his previous film, he employed the new way of digesting information into his old story. *Casualties of War* retells an incident from 1969 during which five members of a reconnaissance squad raped and murdered a Vietnamese girl. For *Redacted*, de Palma adapted an assault against an Iraqi girl in 2006, often referred to as the Mahmudiyah killings. Both events concern real events and take a stand on what the army does to the morale of a human being.

What was so innovative and fresh for de Palma’s approach to Mahmudiyah killings and portraying them in *Redacted* starts in what has been defined in this work as the postmodern influence. Like Mendes’s *Jarhead*, de Palma adjusts the tropes of Vietnam film to show how denotative the war events have become since the Gulf War. The film starts with a disclaimer that the story is “entirely fiction, inspired by an incident widely reported to have occurred in Iraq,” which features “characters [that] are entirely fictional” and should not be “confused with those of real persons,” but while looking at the screen, the words “fictional” and “confused” fade away as first ones. This disclaimer is thus called into question. As Thomas Leitch notes, such ripped from headlines adaptations, take advantage of the real story, and yet conceal it like de Palma did, strategically balancing the “war story” between the historical event and the staging of this event (2007: 282). Consequently, de Palma achieves a documentary “feel” thanks to creating his own stories made by an amalgam of various types of videos: a French documentary about the Iraq War, a soldier’s own video diary (to which others contribute as well), wife reading her husband’s letter for a fictional online website “Just

A Soldier's Wife," cell phone records, surveillance camera's extracts, TV footage from the killings (both Americans killing Iraqis and terrorists killing Americans), terrorists' web sites (soldier falling on a bombed chair to the repeating sound of "Allahu Akbar") and video chats. All these bring out an impression on how the modern media function collecting information almost as Orwell's omnipresent and all-powerful Big Brother. The digital data does not really disappear, and may be repurposed in other contexts. What de Palma does is to seek for reason and veracity in a world of lies spread by media. The major broadcasters prove their omnipotent and omnipresent authority over what comes to mean "knowledge" and "information":

Big Brother is infallible and all-powerful. Every success, every achievement, every victory, every scientific discovery, all knowledge, all wisdom, all happiness, all virtue, are held to issue directly from his leadership and inspiration. Nobody has ever seen Big Brother. He is a face on the hoardings, a voice on the telescreen. We may be reasonably sure that he will never die, and there is already considerable uncertainty as to when he was born. Big Brother is the guise in which the Party chooses to exhibit itself to the world. His function is to act as a focusing point for love, fear, and reverence, emotions which are more easily felt towards an individual than towards an organization. (Orwell, 1949: 121)

The Orwellian multi-presence of sources in *Redacted* and the way with which they may be reproduced and reutilized reminds of Baudrillard's pornographic aspects of war. The truth about the presence of American troops in Iraq becomes obscured. Soldiers take their own videos that have no distance, perception and judgment—the pictures become more immediate resulting in their proliferation for the sole purpose of spreading the violence into the all aspects of daily life. Due to that, people who watch these videos are now permitted to embrace this pornographic face of war.

What happens in *Redacted* that debunks this pornographic face of war is the premeditated rape and the fact that it is captured by a soldier's own camera. The film starts with Angel Salazar (Izzy Diaz), who shoots a diary of his war experience titled *Tell Me No Lies* hoping to use it for admission to university after completing his military service. In the first scene the viewer hears Lawyer McCoy (Rob Devaney)—

the counterpart to private Eriksson (Michael J. Fox) in *Casualties*—saying one of the most significant and yet cliché lines for the entire film: the first casualty of the Iraq War will be the truth. Salazar debunks this in his video, in which there is no combat and that the “deployment [was] unspeakably underwhelming” for the only insurgent they found was a rat. The film he is making consequently will not be a “Hollywood action flick” with “adrenaline-pumping soundtrack” and an interesting plot. The whole video diary is amateurish, and its key purpose seems to be exposition to convey the main characters’ personality traits. In one excerpt the viewer sees private Flake (Patrick Carroll) firing at a car full of Iraqis while they urgently try to pass the checkpoint en route to hospital. Flake guns down a pregnant woman, and when Salazar asks how he feels about it, he concedes that the only language that “the sand niggers” know is the language of force and that he hoped for his first kill to “blow his mind,” but it merely felt like “gutting catfish.” Salazar and McCoy do not fully accept Flake’s attitude towards the “enemy,” since Flake compares “waxing hajis” to “stomping cockroaches,” and their sergeant Jim Vazquez (Mike Figueroa) calms down the situation saying that it is in the rules of engagement to shoot the Iraqis if they pass a checkpoint line.

The morality issues presented both in *Casualties* and *Redacted* go, however, beyond the issue of what rules of engagement allow and what they do not. As the action unveils, viewers see more and more frantic soldiers anticipating a quick end to the war. After witnessing the death of their sergeant who falls on a booby trap, they grow even more agitated and hateful. While looking for information on WMDs in civilians’ houses they confront a journalist who asks them why are they taking the inhabitants’ documents, and they reply that it might be useful information; she then asks why are they putting masks on suspects not allowing them to breathe and shouting at a man on a wheelchair to stand up. Their clear savagery leads to sexual harassment of young girls

passing through the checkpoint, especially one of whom they grow particularly “fond.” Arrangement for the rape happens in the aftermath of all these situations: growing impatience, hatred and sexual frustration. While playing poker and getting drunk, Flake suggests a raid on a house they searched a week ago as he remembers there to be a “tasty skank.” In *Casualties* sergeant Tony Meserve (Sean Penn) comes up with a similar idea and as it happens in *Redacted*, both being effect of experiencing their African American companion dying. The American soldiers during the Vietnam War refer to the Vietcongs in similar terms, calling them lowlifes, “gooks,” motherfuckers and cockroaches. Since Meserve cannot “get laid” before going to recon with his squad he comes up with an idea to “requisition” a girl for them as it would break them from boredom and keep up morale. Just as Eriksson is shocked hearing Meserve, so does McCoy become outraged with Flake’s idea, yet neither of them puts a stop to the situation.

The rape scene is distinctive for each film, being more cinematic in *Casualties* and shown as more raw and cruel in *Redacted*. The camera does not really enter the hut where the soldiers are going to rape the Vietnamese girl, but in *Redacted* the viewers get a first-person vivid display through Salazar’s night-vision camera. This type of associating the enemy with a woman and turning it into the sexual object of the sadistic male gaze happens not only in de Palma’s films, but also in Kubrick’s *FMJ* where the soldiers end up killing a girl sniper. Unlike in *FMJ*, however, the soldiers in *Casualties* and *Redacted* kill an innocent civilian for what they get a sort of karmic vengeance. In the case of *Casualties* Eriksson seeks justice from all of his superiors until he stumbles on a priest in a bar, who finally decides to take the rapists to the martial court, which convicts them and doles out harsh prison sentences. In *Redacted*, McCoy is in denial about the rape until the end, and when he tries to stop it Flake intimidates him and

forces him to leave. After coming back to the base, McCoy tries to persuade another soldier, Gabe Blix, to do something, but McCoy gets threatened by Specialist Rush (Flake's loyal buddy) and reminded that what happens in Iraq should stay in Iraq, suggesting that what happened to the family of the girl they raped was just "some Sunni-Shiite business." The Iraqis, however, are not in doubt about who is to blame, and they capture Salazar making a video in the street. Then the viewers get an excerpt from the same terrorist website that displayed their sergeant's death on the booby trap, this time showing Salazar's beheaded body. In addition to that, the fictional TV channel ATV shows the cinematic beheading of Salazar, who, as the viewers are aware, was not responsible for the rape. This misplaced vengeance proves the futility of war: as McCoy explains, before going on with the rest of his squad to the girl's house "our band of brothers, [lost] their moral compass and [tried] to seek vengeance on a fifteen year old girl." Just as the retribution for sergeant's death was misplaced, similar is the case of decapitating Salazar.

McCoy lacks Eriksson's courage to bring the issue to his superiors, and instead he makes an anonymous online video asking for help. While being investigated, he could not say for sure what had happened as "Flake sent him on watch." Unlike in *Casualties* de Palma does not show what happened to the accused soldiers, thus, the root of the critical accusation that this one-sided, anti-American film would lead viewers to think that the military would actually cover up war crimes in Iraq by calling the dead civilians "collateral damage." In fact, *Redacted* ends with a powerful display of real victims' dead bodies: little girls, women with children, infants, pregnant women... and then skips to a badly fabricated photo of the raped and killed girl from Samarra. For those who disagreed with the film's anti-American propaganda, one of

the core arguments was that the case against the soldiers—who were later found guilty for Mahmudiyah killings—was still open when the film came to cinemas.

What can be summed up about the ideological layer of de Palma's film is that *Redacted* is not as much anti-American as it is anti-war. The director said that he had done his part in interviewing the soldiers and, from what he gathered, none of them knew what they were doing in Iraq, who and where was the enemy, and that there was nothing to take their edge off—in Vietnam, “at least they had whorehouses.” In the film, the only justification of the U.S. army's presence in Iraq is offered by McCoy, who offers the disingenuous claim that “we're helping the new Iraqi government survive,” and that they are simply soldiers who should obey their orders. In the end, during his “welcome the war hero” party, McCoy adds that when he was going to Afghanistan he was all “amped up” to kill in retaliation for “what they did to the Towers,” but that Iraq is a totally different story. This division between killing in retaliation and being in Iraq for an unspecified reason blurs the line between valid and invalid war, turning the actual war experience into a futile one.

Ideologically, criticizing the war, De Palma's point of view can be seen in one of the ending scenes, showing a young, angry girl's outburst on an online video-sharing platform:

This is the same monster immortalized in every fucking movie about Vietnam. “Let's do the whole fucking village!” You don't see the My Lai massacre in the movies because the truths of that fascist orgy are just too hellish for even liberal Hollywood to cop to. Oh, but that doesn't stop them making another movie about 9/11 because an American life is worth so much more than a Vietnamese, a Palestinian, a Lebanese, or an Iraqi life because we are the uber race.

On some level the “tattooed girl” from the video tries to emphasize that Hollywood is not really interested in stories about American war crimes, and that it prefers victimizing narratives about 9/11. Yet at the point when de Palma was making his movie it was early to speak of what Iraq films would or would not discuss. By 2007, no film had glorified the American presence in Iraq, except perhaps *Home of the Brave*



(2006), which despite its different tone, also flopped at the box office. Seemingly then, since the war was already played out in living rooms, people felt no need to go and see it additionally in the cinemas.

One of the *Redacted's* sections is a documentary shot by (faux) French filmmakers called "Barrage: A Film by Marc et François Clément." It is constructed very cinematically; with extradiegetic music (George Frederic Handel's "Sarabande"), close-ups and narration like in Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955) the whole section becomes a parody of nonfiction filmmaking. But it usefully explains, for example, that over half of Iraqis cannot read and therefore do not know that the entrance to checkpoints is forbidden: this becomes juxtaposed with Flake shooting a pregnant woman in a car, trying to reach the hospital. These fragments are short and underdeveloped, taking second place to more amateurish videos from Salazar and others. Perhaps had de Palma focused more on this parody of how documentarians and news media use these "pornographic" war pictures, the film would be more focused.

The war experience in de Palma's film embodies then the atmosphere of the media spectacle. The viewers were fed with the war information about the war since its inception, and the way of this feeding was similar to the postmodern reporting of the Gulf War in terms of saturation of the news and focusing on making the events as making them immediate and video-game like ultimately replacing the war experience in traditional sense (diaries, letters, memoirs) with media bombardment of the instantaneous war imagery. Salazar's video diary does not show him telling tales of his experiences after the fact, but presents the death of their sergeant and the rape of an Iraqi girl as they happened.

To further understand what Baudrillard meant by displaying such pictures in the instant form (as being accessible immediately via Internet) of dead bodies and

gruesome portrayal of rape and murder, one needs to look closer at his definition of war pornography. After September 11, Baudrillard did not believe that there was any world power, and the inhumane abuse the Americans inflicted on Iraqis became a parody of power (2003: 43).<sup>6</sup> What happened in Abu Ghraib, the way in which soldiers sadistically performed their duties, proved how excess of power can become an abject of pornography, as the soldiers went above their orders enacting power given to them resulting in effect in obtaining a parody of power. Although the images cannot tell the whole truth, the soldiers immerse themselves now in them, taking their direct first-hand war experience and using the technology to spread these images. War, according to Paul Virilio, has always been merely its own representation; “[w]ar can never break free from the magical spectacle because its very purpose is to produce that spectacle: to fell the enemy is not so much to capture as to ‘captivate’ him, to instil (sic) the fear of death before he actually dies” (Virilio, 1992:5), and the Gulf War along with the Iraq War has taken this representation only further immersing the soldier into the spectacle himself. Thus, the soldiers’ own pictures do not represent the war, as they lack distance, perception, and judgment (Baudrillard, 2005: 207). What has become of war representation then? Baudrillard argues that the visibility of everything has made the war pornographic, and those who take the pictures and create the spectacle will perish along with this spectacle. Framing the Abu Ghraib pictures as an attempt to humiliate the enemy in retaliation for 9/11 does not differ from the case of Salazar’s video of an Iraqi girl’s rape. Salazar wanted to showcase the “truth,” but truth becomes as irrelevant as the justifications of Abu Ghraib’s perpetrators. Salazar was urged by the need to take ghastly pornographic photos just to get accepted in the film school. And like in

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<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of how 9/11 collapsed the illusion of power, see Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, New York: Verso, 2003.

Baudrillard's words "those who live by spectacle will die by spectacle," Salazar is decapitated in a video made by Iraqi insurgents. The film's dialogue makes a direct reference to Abu Ghraib when McCoy calls his father, presumably a Vietnam War veteran, and tells him that something horrible was done by the members of his squad. His father warns him how serious it could get, declaring that the military doesn't need "another Abu Ghraib," suggesting that the U.S. should not encounter any more scandals that could undermine the New World Order.

As one of the first films about the Iraq War, *Redacted* reveals many characteristics that mark later Iraq War films while sharing other characteristics with the Gulf films. What *Redacted* does not show is the combat – although soldiers shoot at a car with innocent Iraqis and murder their rape victim's family, there is no direct fight with anyone figured as an enemy. Terrorists bomb the Americans (sergeant Sweet) and behead them in retribution, but combat in traditional sense, i.e. attacking the enemy face to face (like can be seen for example in de Palma's *Casualties*), never appears. There is seeking for truth like in *Courage Under Fire*, where like Serling investigating Karen Walden, McCoy tries to uncover what really happened to the girl and her family, the impotence of war comes through as in *Jarhead* – the soldiers want to "get some" action, but there does not seem to be any sure target.

The way in which *Redacted* was shot, with its innovative technique of video collage, is unique for Iraq War films and embodies perhaps the best illustration of postmodern influence on this particular subgenre of the war film. The fact and its representation are distorted, ultimately producing a confusing image that informs less about the war, than about the way in which it is denoted. Again, as Virilio said, the war always becomes what its representations let us believe it is.

### 3.5 Adrenaline junkie and *The Hurt Locker* (2008)

While both *Jarhead* and *Redacted* focused more on day-to-day struggles of a soldier, and visually incorporated the postmodern influence, 2008 was a breaking point that brought more action-focused narratives. The Academy Award for Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, a film that also portrayed the day-to-day struggles, but in a more exciting way showing combat experiences of a bomb disposal squad, brought somewhat a change in representing the Iraq War as more of an exhilarating experience (similarly to Basinger's note on how WW2 showed war as both hell and exciting adventure).

Mark Boal, who collaborated with Basinger on *The Hurt Locker*, as a journalist with the firsthand experience of interacting with bomb squads in Iraq, managed to create convincing characters. Despite Boal inspiring Bigelow to make a film about soldiers, she had already depicted the military life in her 2002 film *K-19 Widowmaker*. Not exactly a war film per se, with action set during the Cold War, *K-19* drew upon military dynamics that Bigelow would use again in *The Hurt Locker*. Her interest in the war film, and particularly in a combat film, brings novelty to Iraq war filmmaking. *K-19* is claustrophobic set in a cramped submarine, where the tension is raised by increasing irradiation, and *The Hurt Locker* is filmed mainly in Morocco, where the streets and desert landscapes give the feeling of vastness—the danger is there then less claustrophobic, but the tension is brought by the limited time.

Bigelow's film was indeed the first film that focused only on combat, aligning her work on *The Hurt Locker* with Vietnam War films *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now* or *Full Metal Jacket* (Dawson: 2010). However, despite her declared affinity with these predecessors, it would be a mistake to see *The Hurt Locker* as lying outside of the generic framework of Iraq War films due to its particular combat sequences and

ambiguity in political stance on the war—both anti- and pro-? While *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* are for example also not exactly anti- or pro-war, they discuss conduct during warfare; meanwhile, *The Hurt Locker* is saturated with action instead. Kubrick's film, as noted above, is structured in line with the camp-to-combat paradigm, and its ending takes a satirical stand towards the genre it is imitating. Bigelow, on the other hand, whose trademark is playing with genre tension, seems to be taking more of the action genre and adding to it a documentary feel that comes from the war film, specifically the Iraq War film. She does not use many tropes known from the Vietnam War films, and she tries to reconcile the Iraq film with what has become of combat these days.

Close reading will help us further investigate how *The Hurt Locker* works as a combat film and its involvement with the Iraq War film. The film starts with a bomb squad trying to defuse the bomb. From the environment, viewers place themselves in the heart of Iraq – the sound of adhan, men in thawbs and keffiyehs, an abundance of sand, a mosque in the alley and goats passing on the road. The explosive ordinance disposal (EOD) squad consists of three men – Sergeant Thompson (Guy Pearce), Sergeant JT Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) and Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty). In the very first sequence Bigelow sets the tone for the film by showing how in reality the bomb squads work (one of her priorities to claim the authenticity). First, the team clears the area, then sends a robot with a barrow, which tries to retrieve the bomb and detonate it safely. Things go wrong, however, and Thompson needs to reattach the wheels of the barrow. In the meantime, Sanborn and Eldridge make nervous jokes about setting up a grass business in Iraq. The jokes mark the cuts from Thompson's slow and careful work with the barrow to Sanborn's and Eldridge's puns they make while checking the area. Sanborn is approached by an Iraqi who asks him

where is he from, a suspicious encounter under the circumstances, and Sanborn sends him away. Soon after, Eldridge notices a man in front of a grocery store with a phone—as it could possibly be an explosive device, Eldridge tries to take a shot, but he never manages. Thompson runs for his life, but the bomb goes off. In one of Bigelow's best shots, the viewer sees shaking ground, smoke, and debris flying in the air. Thompson falls and the scene is over. As she had used in *Point Break* (1991), Bigelow uses four cameras to capture a 360-degree angle of the explosion, giving the film a necessary multi-dimensional perspective and provoking a stronger reaction in the viewers. Bigelow said:

Even though the camera's moving, even though the shot might be very short, if there's a lack of orientation, it's instantaneous and you recover from it, or you never lose it. I don't want to ask the audience to recover their footing and reorient themselves. I want to never lose them. In fact, I want to draw them further and further into this vortex of information. Then I feel like I've succeeded in at least presenting an event in as experiential a way as possible. (Dawson: 2010)

The next scene reveals that Thompson did not survive the blast. Sanborn and Eldridge mourn him as his personal belongings are being shipped off back to the U.S in a so-called hurt locker—"the temporal and physical space of peril and pain that the film understands as beyond any sectarian frame" (Benson-Allott: 43). This term is obviously being used here metaphorically and brings a lyrical gloom to the war story suggesting that the soldiers never really leave "the hurt locker" and the war damages them not only physically but also mentally.

Thompson's replacement, Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), who served earlier in Afghanistan, is introduced right after the "hurt locker" scene. Rather aloof, James does not seem to care about mortars that might kill them at night; he likes "sunshine" and listens to loud metal music. The last one, in particular his choice of song, foreshadows his personality. It is not for long, however, that Bigelow allows the viewers to hear James' music; the song, and particularly all the songs that Bigelow uses from the band Ministry, have anti-war and anti-Bush message. A short excerpt from

James' "introductory" song titled "Fear (Is Big Business)" reveals not only these anti-government inclinations, but also what has been assumed by the postmodern power of the media to disrupt daily life with an abundance of information:

Who the fuck's to blame for my mental disease  
Pick out any country in the Middle East  
But Oklahoma City happened right next to me  
And don't forget Waco and the government siege

Fear is big business

Fear on the television always the same  
Terrorists everywhere including my brain  
I was never frightened of Saddam Hussein  
The US government's the one to blame

In their first combat action together James is very eager to get quickly to the source of danger. Just like an addict, he rushes to the bomb, ignoring other members of his team and creating diversion by spreading smoke so that they (and the insurgents presumably) could not see him. Bigelow portrays him as cocky in that scene, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth as he goes to defuse the bomb. Eldridge calls him a "rowdy boy" and Sanborn sums him up as a reckless, "redneck piece of trailer trash." James seems oblivious to the fact that the other members of his EOD do not find him a good team player, considering defusing bombs as part of combat and seeing himself as fulfilling his job.

The job of a bomb squad is not easy, and Bigelow raises tension with every task that James and his crew undertake. The third action focuses on a car trunk full of bombs. James, eager to defuse it, rejects the idea of detonating the car, removing his headset and indirectly endangering the lives of Eldridge and Sanborn. It is also the only time when the EOD team is shown working with other Marines and the only time a leader is shown acting heartlessly by deciding that a wounded Iraqi "was not going to make it." That same leader is proud of James' work and courage ("you're the wild one") and asks him directly about the number of bombs he defused, a question that James hesitates to

answer before fixing the number at a staggering 837. Challenging himself to neutralize the bombs even if there is no need for that, James exhibits the traits of an addict. James also collects the fragments of bombs he has defused, revealing his need to possess the object of his desire—a mere attempt at catching the ephemeral moment of fear, death, and adrenaline rush.

After removing the headset James causes tension in his squad, and while detonating the explosives, Eldridge and Sanborn contemplate killing him as he is a threat to their own lives. Eventually nothing happens, and during their fourth action, they get a chance to bond over a shared near-death experience. Happening roughly in the middle of the film, another action sequence of combat happens not on the battlefield, but in the middle of the desert, where an unlucky crew of British mercenaries gets a flat tire. They hold two hostages from Bush's deck of cards<sup>7</sup>. When the EOD squad offers them help they all suddenly fall under "enemy" fire. Here, the enemy is invisible—not Iraqi soldiers, but some unspecified insurgents shoot sniper rifles at the "allied" forces. The rebels are extremely skilled shooters, and they manage to kill all but one mercenary. While Sanborn and James try to kill the enemy snipers, Eldridge trembles underneath them. Close-up shots show James' eyelid immobilized and focused so much on the stakeout that he does not notice a fly trying to penetrate his eye, Sanborn's eyelashes magnified through the rifle's monopod, and Eldridge's attempts to clean the blood-stained bullets in the cartridge. The soldiers' bullets are shown going off in slow motion, unlike the insurgents' shots that rapidly come at the mercenaries killing them directly. Bigelow does not display the rebels directly – at first the only way to see them is through rifle's monopods and binoculars, then she films them from behind as they

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<sup>7</sup> In 2003 the U.S. military developed a deck of cards that would feature the most wanted Iraqis, in which the highest cards were also the most valuable (in rewards) terrorists (e.g. the Ace of Spades was Saddam Hussein). Ironically referred often as the "Bush's deck," it was featured in *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone*, *The Men Who Stare at Goats* among others.



watch the Americans. If not for this shift in perspective, the scene would have been kept just from the soldiers' point of view. Though the insurgents are not important in this story—their faces do not matter, and on this point Bigelow falls in line with Orientalist conventions, showcasing thawbs and keffiyehs holding rifles rather than people, she is showing a willingness to take their perspective, thus portraying the conflict to a certain extent through the eyes of the “enemy.”

The fourth bomb is found in the building of an explosives manufacturer. The squad finds there the body of a dead boy, transformed into a booby trap by inserting an explosive into his abdomen. James thinks that it was a DVD seller's apprentice, a boy who called himself “Beckham,” and he suggests detonating the whole building before changing his mind. Looking distraught, he defuses the bomb in the boy's body, but James' distress and agitation makes the viewers think that he is indeed attached to this boy in some way. He uses the adrenaline rush to find the boy's family and learn what happened to Beckham. After threatening the DVD seller, who speaks no English and does not understand James' request to take him to the boy's parents, James ends up raiding an unrelated Iraqi family's house. Inside, a man who introduces himself as professor Nabil, invites James to sit with him at the table, presuming that James is from CIA. As James slowly realizes, he is in the wrong place, simply trying to get some action. He withdraws, shouted at by Nabil's wife, and rushes back to base. The welcome is not warm as one might think – he is thoroughly searched and when asked where did he go, he answers that he was “at a whorehouse.” The soldier who questions him says that he will let him in only if he will reveal the brothel's location. Clearly a comic relief, it winks at the problem of sexual frustration among the soldiers.

More to the point, James' affection for Beckham turns out to be insincere, since the boy is not really dead. The real Beckham approaches James in one of the last scenes

asking him to play football together, but James is untouched. The boy was just an excuse for him to get some kicks in combat. It appears that Sanborn was right when he presumed that the dead boy was not Beckham as for them “all Iraqi kids look the same.” This reveals at one point the total disregard towards the Iraqi Other, who despite not being exactly an enemy remains nonetheless in the orbit of disdain. In *Control Room* (2004), a documentary by Jehane Noujaim, a viewer can hear an American soldier contemplating how Americans do not care about Iraqi deaths shown on TV, but they tremble and weep when a dead American body is shown. This same soldier realizes that very similar feelings have to overwhelm Iraqis when watching their dead folk on Al-Jazeera. The deaths of both Iraqis and Americans are treated with similarly shocking effects, yet the American soldiers dying on the line of duty while trying to protect Iraqis from insurgents’ bombs, still attract more compassion. Although James might use the event of Beckham’s supposed death for the kicks of combat, he remains equally careless about his comrades’ well-being.

The last EOD action in the film is a suicide bomb, where an Iraqi man has been chained, apparently unwillingly, to an explosive belt. The translator urges the crew to save the man’s life, as he keeps reassuring them that he is a good man and a father of four. James again uses this excuse to save a life of a “good man” by risking his own. Only in the final seconds, when it becomes clear that he cannot defuse the bomb nor remove the belt, he runs. In a similar sequence to the one in the beginning where the viewers saw Thompson running, James escapes the deadly blast. As an adrenaline junkie, James, after the action where he could have died, smokes a sort of post-coital cigarette, equalizing the pleasure of war with the pleasure of sex. The difficulty of their job and the tension of the situation gets to Sanborn, who tells James that he cannot understand how he risks his life like this on a daily basis, especially with a son waiting

for him back home. Although Sanborn's remark that he himself has no son (yet) could be treated in terms of patriarchal order, where the epitome of masculinity, a soldier, complains about a lack of male successor, Bigelow has already shown an ultimately masculine world in her film, where until the very last scene there is no woman. Sanborn's observation, then, does not subvert the patriarchal codes shown in other films by Bigelow (*Strange Days* [1995], *Near Dark* [1987]), but it exaggerates them to the point where the action/war genre is equated with masculine gender.

The conventions that *The Hurt Locker* shares with Vietnam films and with the combat genre in general are visible in the characters' dynamics and the specificities of the plot, pointing to other areas where Bigelow plays with generic expectations by revising the old conventions. The narrative in very general terms looks like other war stories based on the Western film: there is dichotomy between the Westerner and the Other, between civilization and the wilderness. The American soldiers have moral standards that they defend against the Iraqi insurgents who attempt to destroy everything that belongs to civilization: houses, roads, people. Just as in *Sands* there are Japs, and in *FMJ* there are Commies, in *Jarhead*, *The Hurt Locker* and all other Iraq War films there are "Hajis." The male protagonist, James, is in a group of soldiers whose interactions with one another are more crucial to the war than the combat with their common enemy. Soldier dynamics are most important in all the warzone films presented here, and Bigelow takes advantage of this trope as well. Like in many of these films, the main character's dilemma is whether he should sacrifice himself for the rest (Monfriez in *Courage Under Fire*, Swofford in *Jarhead*, Flake in *Redacted*, Stryker in *Sands*, Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*) and become a good team player or keep his individual character on display at all times. James has moments of male bonding with the others, but his sacrifice for the squad members never happens. Just like Flake in *Redacted* and

Kurtz in *Apocalypse* have similar moment of bonding with others, they both do not wish to act ideologically/morally acceptable to the group, but choose their own logics of conduct. In case of those that reject sacrifice, often due to some kind of war trauma, retribution becomes an unavoidable fate. Bigelow complicates this trope by making James bond with others while remaining emotionally distant, resulting in him rejecting this notion of sacrifice for others. He does not suffer from any punishment, however, as he does not seem to care about wounding Eldridge or risking Sanborn's life.

Although *The Hurt Locker* reveals many features in common with the combat film (especially Vietnam films) and is packed with Bigelow's auterist statements and style, it is also impacted largely by the reality of "new" war and the postmodern influence on creation of identity. In one of the last scenes of *The Hurt Locker*, James is back at home with his ex-wife and son. Civilian life bores him, as he says to his son that he does not "love" anymore things usually prescribed to the social life. He "loves" only one thing – the action of combat. Nothing else excites him about life; everything is merely a simulation of the real experience. The notion of losing his life and endangering himself are the only "real" things that he knows of. It becomes also clear in the scene in the market at the end, where he is shopping with his wife. He looks at fridges with pizzas and the boxes of cereal thinking how dull and same this all is.

Just as the war focuses more and more on improving the warfare through growing technologization and distancing of the soldier from the static combat, everything changes its perspective from being seen by a soldier himself to being seen by the masses through the telescopic lenses, satellite photos and virtual simulations. As in answer to that, Bigelow uses the variety of cinematic innovations to reveal these changes in the war itself. Her usage of slow motion in *Strange Days* endeavored to increase the viewers' investment in the story. She expanded this technique in *The Hurt*

*Locker* for the purpose of creating more tension; hence, the bomb does not just go off—it explodes slowly with the debris plummeting onto the camera lenses and killing the “collaterals” indolently, making their death come a couple of seconds slower. She simulates the bomb explosion to accentuate its destructiveness and temporality of human life rather than making it just as it is—rapid and terminal. Different perspectives, she claimed, sought to explain different stories from different points of view. An actual soldier cannot see as many standpoints, so while Bigelow claimed that her film really explained how it is to be in the warzone, at the same time it used many techniques that “show how it is” in the postmodern era where the augmented virtuality becomes a fact. The slow motion, defocalized perspectives, long shots and camera transitions end up upsetting the war film pacing (Benson-Allott: 43), making *The Hurt Locker* different than the war films before and befitting the category of the Iraq War film.

### **3.6 The justification of war and *Green Zone* (2010)**

After Kathryn Bigelow got an Oscar for *The Hurt Locker*, it would have seemed that the curse on the Iraq War film has been lifted. Just as she stumbled upon many refusals while looking for producers, *The Hurt Locker*’s outstanding success paved the way for others fascinated with the war and an idea to transform it into a motion picture. So when Paul Greengrass offered to make a film about the Iraq War he got the highest budget (100 million \$) among all the produced Iraq films until now. He made a film that could be considered as the first post-war film<sup>8</sup> or at least as the first film that tries

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<sup>8</sup> The withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Iraq started in June 2009 and ended in December 2011. Despite the troops leaving Iraq, the crisis and conflict in the country are nowhere near ending. The fights for religious dominance surface as the post-Iraq War backlashes.

to deal with the legitimacy of the Iraq War. The war fatigue in America caused people to believe that the post-9/11 war with Iraq was not worth fighting (Witcover: 2013), and these sentiments were embodied in Greengrass' film.

Greengrass wanted to make a film about the Iraq War since 2004 as he found the U.S. political situation at the time absorbing (Walters: 2010). Since the war's inception he made two films about Jason Bourne, an amnesiac CIA agent on international missions proving his engagement with the post-9/11 trauma and depression. Due to that he managed to make his portrayal of Robert Ludlum's character "closer to the real world" by enhancing this "real world" with fear, paranoia and mistrust that were spread out in the society in the aftermath of the attacks (Walters). It was not enough for Greengrass, however, as he wanted to engage with the war subject directly. In 2006 he made a film about the 9/11 attacks. His *United 93* was "the way to get to the heart of 9/11," and create a hypothetical version of events that could have happened on the United Flight 93 that crashed into a field in Pennsylvania and not to its intended object of attack. *Green Zone*, Greengrass' third film immersed in the atmosphere of anti-establishment paranoia and fear, engages in the hunt for weapons of mass destruction (WMD). *Green Zone* tries to "get to the reality of an event that's been so politically overlaid" and to debunk the validity of government's justification for war. All three films are speaking of the Bush years, and as much as Greengrass' Bourne films are the "popcorn" version of the U.S. times under Bush's presidency, *United 93* has a grief-stricken and solemn tone. *Green Zone* positions itself between these two films: on one hand, it questions the war's intent, and on the other it disguises "macho" Bourne in a soldier's uniform. Its complex plot focuses on a political cover-up of truth. Just like in Zwick's *Courage* and de Palma's *Redacted*, the postmodern reality, in

which the fact is obscured, surfaces and needs to be debunked by the main protagonist. *Green Zone* balances then between being a political thriller and an action flick.

Greengrass claimed that his film was not anti-war. In an odd attempt to defend *Green Zone* as being just an “exciting story” connecting viewers with his Iraq War version of James Bourne, Greengrass claimed that his film is about a hero who uncovers the truth about WMD rather than speaks on the war itself (but it surely says that the reason for war was manufactured... yet he claims his film is not anti-war) (Hewitt: 2010). The viewers are, thus, supposed to position themselves in the role of the main character, who went to war for the wrong reasons. Greengrass was somewhat inspired by Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s book *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* that constitutes of a series of anecdotes and stories about the Iraq War. The Green Zone was an American district in the central Baghdad placed around former palaces of Saddam Hussein and headquarters of Iraqi regime. Although Chandrasekaran’s book is not precisely a novel with a concrete character, it shares some of the anti-war attitudes of the author.

The film starts with the Iraqis abandoning the headquarters as the explosives hit the building. Tense music, shouting and the sound of gunfire accompany their hasty escape. Then the buildings go into distance and the viewers see a spectacular show of huge explosions that lit up the sky. This action sequence puts the viewers in the center of the war. The main character of *Green Zone* is U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer Roy Miller (Matt Damon), who leads a Mobile Exploitation Team (MET) aiming at locating the WMD sites. It is him with whom the viewers are supposed to identify in the task of uncovering the truth behind the war. The first site that Miller’s team tries to secure is located in Diwaniya. Instead of a sheltered area, however, soldiers find looters taking everything out. This brings feelings of futility—the soldiers want to work in order to protect their country, as after 9/11 they cannot afford themselves to make another

mistake. Here, unlike in previous Iraq films, there is no character development of other soldiers. Damon's character is the only one that matters and who has a mission to procure. The third scene cuts to Baghdad Airport where a journalist, Lawrie Dayne (Amy Ryan), questions a member of Pentagon Special Intelligence, Clark Poundstone (Greg Kinnear), on the identity of "Magellan"—an Iraqi source that has been feeding the U.S. forces with the information on WMD locations. Just as Lawrie states that the whole world is watching and they have to find these weapons soon, the main theme of the film is foreshadowed. The film structure focuses then on three connected stories: the Iraqi insurgents, Damon's aim to find the WMD and the government/media struggle on the war justification and division of power in Iraq.

In the first scenes showing the search for WMD by Damon's squad, his impatience and agitation are highlighted. The sites, clearly, hide no danger, and when it comes to the meeting with his superiors, Chief Miller expresses his distrust to the orders as he feels that "they are wasting time." Leaders are not happy with his attitude, which serves a reminder that a good soldier does not question orders, but he merely executes them. Damon's character, then, is more of a rebel than the previous Iraq films protagonists, who does not fear to lose his life in the search for truth. Although James in *The Hurt Locker* is just as fearless, he is not motivated to be a "hero" by any moral stand. He does not care for "truth" or "glory"; what he does is for his own satisfaction. Unlike the other protagonists, however, Damon is portraying a character in *Green Zone* that has no backstory: nothing about him is revealed later on. According to Greengrass this was, first of all, the result of his distaste towards the manufactured backstory (which he considers his auteur feature), and secondly, his wish of reading the narrative as pure experience that would give the viewer the direct meaning of identifying with the protagonist: "the character is us" (Hewitt). Whether it is a successful endeavor is



dubious for two reasons: one, many have already digested the lie about the WMD, and two, Matt Damon is already strongly identified with other films he played in (except for the Bourne trilogy, he is widely acknowledged for playing masculine characters of soldiers and cops, e.g. *Courage Under Fire* [1996], *Saving Private Ryan* [1998], *The Monuments Men* [2014], *The Departed* [2006], *True Grit* [2010], *Elysium* [2013]).

The portion of the film that focuses on the political thriller involves three parties, two of them already mentioned above: a man from the Bush administration, the journalist and the CIA agent Martin Brown (Brendan Gleeson). The last one criticizes the search for WMD saying “this thing doesn’t add up” as “the Iraqis don’t fight, they don’t use WMD, they let us walk in here and find the goddamn cupboard’s bare, there’s something wrong here.” Clark Poundstone, responsible for creating a temporary government in Iraq and dealing with the remains of the Ba’ath party, disagrees with Brown about setting new government with a previous Iraqi general. Brown, on the other hand, is convinced that the country cannot be ruled by Zubaidi – an American puppet that nobody has ever heard of. He proposes to ask for help the Iraqi army, as not everyone was there loyal to Saddam. Poundstone is rather motivated to find someone neutral who would be able to unite the Kurds, the Shia and the Sunni, while an old general could merely satisfy the wishes of the last group. In the meantime, the journalist is questioning Poundstone about Magellan – the source that fed the U.S. public with information on the WMD. Throughout the main part of the film it is ambiguous whether Poundstone or Brown are in the right here. Brown seems to be very knowledgeable in terms of WMD sites being empty, but his main concerns are related to giving the power to Iraqis and finding the best way to sustain the peace in the region.

The way in which Chief Miller gets dragged into the whole “who made up the story about WMD” seems rather unrealistic and to a certain point ludicrous. His MET

squad is digging in Al Mansour, one of the districts of Baghdad, an urban area. While Miller sits in a car waiting for the team to find nothing (which he knows of from Brown, but is listening to orders for now), he is hearing some commotion at the site. When he asks what happened, one of the soldier says that “a Haji” wants to share some information. He approaches the man who introduces himself as Farid (Khalid Abdalla, who played a plane hijacker in Greengrass’ *United 93*), but asks Damon to call him Freddy. He informs the soldiers that what they are doing is fruitless and that people around are wondering how could anybody have dug anything up in the middle of the streets without them seeing it. Freddy then encourages Miller to get interested in far more important matters such as the meeting of highly ranked Iraqi army members. Whether annoyed with his superiors for not listening to him or motivated to actually do something useful, Miller abandons his mission and follows Freddy, knowing that he is possibly risking getting into an ambush. They reach the home, where a fictional character, General Al Rawi (Igal Naor) – a Jack of Clubs in the military’s high target deck, seems to be the potential link in revealing the truth about the WMD.

The relationship between Miller and Freddy is unusual for the Iraq films. The attachment to an Iraqi is also shown in more recent *Boys of Abu Ghraib* (2014), where an American soldier develops friendship with an inmate. Although Miller and Freddy’s relation is not forced as Freddy is coming willingly to help, they do not really end up sharing war stories or talking about anything else than the situation they got themselves into. Their dynamics reflect more of what Greengrass intended for viewers to understand from the beginning: how futile this war has become. Just as Miller is not really a tangible character, but rather a device to put the audience into the film, so Freddy is more of “the Iraq” side of war, where the Iraqis are not enemies, but people who want to control their own country’s politics. Iraqis are not exactly the enemies in

this war, but in the earlier films they do not function in an ally mode like in *Green Zone*. It is hard to decipher who is this supposed enemy in Greengrass' film. In many scenes that cross the action and political plots the members of Iraqi army are shown as willing to be included in the ruling. They are aware that "the streets are full of anarchy" and that the "violence (...) increases while the Americans try to manufacture democracy," but they decide to wait for the U.S. establishment to ask them for help in creating new power structure. When it eventually fails and they realize they will not be asked for aid, they are being shown as building bombs. In the end of the day, however, Greengrass does not portray them as dichotomous other, but highlights their rights. They want to have their piece in the government and a say in the politics.

Millen then wants to find Al Rawi, and sets up the meeting with Brown in the Green Zone. The whole area is here presented like a holiday resort – women in bikinis, men drinking beer and eating Domino's Pizza while sitting at the pool and listening to hip hop music. Damon and his soldiers enter the area with disbelief, as their work in Iraqi streets is nothing of the sort. Getting to the Green Zone gives Miller also a chance to interact with Lawrie for the first time, and the journalist expresses her doubts on the WMD. Interested in what she has to say on the matter, Miller searches for information about Lawrie and finds her articles on WMD that mention the sites his team has already checked. He learns about the mysterious Magellan and decides to find out more. After that, Poundstone questions him about the book, which might help him find Al Rawi, and offers Miller a job in return for help. Miller, angry, goes to Brown and tells him he needs to learn why they could not have found any WMD. He blames the intelligence for it, not necessarily thinks yet that there are no WMD in Iraq. In the meantime, it becomes clear that Poundstone does not want Al Rawi found as he is the manufactured "Magellan." The truth is, however, that Al Rawi informed Poundstone that there were

no WMD in Iraq, but for the purpose of executing the U.S. politics, this truth has been fabricated to claim the opposite. The government, then, gave the soldiers fake objectives. The *real* enemy turns out to be the Bush administration.

*Green Zone* shares many conventions of the war film: it tells a story of a war hero, who needs to separate himself from the military's prerogatives in order to debunk the truth of war. It contains the typical war iconography, discussion on the war propaganda (its justification and, then, demystification), and shows the victims (dead bodies of both Iraqis and Americans). What it does not include, however, is the previously accentuated ethnic mix of soldiers—in Miller's team everyone is white; also the CIA agent, the Pentagon Special Intelligence member and the journalist are all white Americans. The only members of the cast that are not white are Iraqis who somewhat highlight the difference between "us" and "them." Moreover, there is a lack of enemy as there is no confirmation that the Iraqi civilians are indeed against the U.S. forces as one of them, Freddy, cooperates with them. The internal group conflicts and succeeding it male bonding does not happen either. The conflict is replaced by the struggle between a soldier and the U.S. establishment, but even in its case there is no solution to it. Despite the film being also placed technically in the warzone (Green Zone is the governmental center, but the main character fulfills his duties in the field) there is a female character, who does not play a crucial role, but with her presence surely breaks the conventions of the most ordinary combat film.

*Green Zone*, being a sort "post-classical" film in terms of its action sequences saturated with intensified editing, bares similarities with postmodern disruption of continuity and fragmentation of time. The effect of globalization, the new understanding of temporality (starting from time division in late 19<sup>th</sup> century) affects much of contemporary cinema, but the action sequences and comprehending of this

new postmodern reality are embedded in the Iraq films quite pungently. *Green Zone* is then a direct consequence of new filmmaking, but it also intertwines with the technologized warfare of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, Greengrass like Zwick and de Palma incorporate the postmodern skepticism towards the truth and reading the historical fact. The established fact that the Iraqis hold WMD (Bush, 2001: “We will confront weapons of mass destruction, so that a new century is spared new horrors”) turns out to be U.S. propaganda, an invention just to validate the war. Having made clear this point on how betrayed the soldiers feel in the film, it is difficult not to classify this picture as having anti-war proclivities. *Green Zone* has the strongest voice among the Iraq films in addressing its stand towards the war. The portrayal of combat in it does not bring out any feelings towards it as it reminds of a video game. Fires, explosions, helicopters and bombings do not evoke any emotional engagement as the action is overshadowed by the story.

*Green Zone* is an action flick more so than *The Hurt Locker* as the latter one uses more sublime aesthetics and does not motivate its narrative with clichéd dialogue and characters. Greengrass bets on caricaturized versions of soldiers, government suits, CIA agents and journalists. Nothing is left in the grey, even the “truth.” *Green Zone* manages then to remain in the orbit of hackneyed narrative yet getting impacted by the postmodern conditions both of war and the new hatching genre.

## CHAPTER 4

### **THE JOURNALIST IN THE WAR ZONE**

The spread of terrifying photographs taken by the U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib that showed many examples of torturing the imprisoned Iraqis, demonstrated that the accessibility of war experiences and information became an easier task to the journalists. Here was all they needed: the perpetrators took the photos themselves, and the job of a reporter was only to dress these pictures in words. Media spread then the information already accessible to people: for example, *The Economist*, which was previously supporting Bush's reelection, changed its tone to more critical, adapting to the nationwide outrage.

As the wars became more technology-driven and the media gained wider access to people's lives, war correspondents became crucial players in the work of justifying or condemning the war to the masses. Mark Poster has claimed that postmodern media transform the identity of a man who would rather live in a simulational culture of virtual reality than in the individually constructed world. This new postmodern subject would be unstable, multiple and diffused, subverting the way in which media are perceived. The immediate information on the war that the journalists provide, then, is digested quickly and proliferated via Internet, placing senders and addressees in symmetrical

relations (Poster). The war correspondents, apart from their personal political views, are outside of the power system that decides on the war, which makes their accounts seem more ‘objective’ to the readers/viewers.

Departing, however, from the way in which the information about war gets proliferated in the postmodern times, the task of the journalist is to provide the truthful account on the war. The public does not usually have time and resources to thoroughly research the government motives when it comes to declaring the war, and feels more trusting towards the third party’s story. The journalists often go to the war zone with wish to “discover the truth” making presupposition that their government is lying about something or at least not telling them everything.

The war correspondent’s significance in this respect does not vary so much from war to war, but the role of a war correspondent stretches its influence as wars become more and more mediated. This tangible influence is emphasized in films that feature a journalist character. An example to that may be the case of Abu Ghraib, which caused great uproar in the U.S., and yet the reporters who broke the story never attracted as much attention as the perpetrators of the act. Errol Morris’ documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) focuses on the soldiers of Abu Ghraib, not the story’s implications for the war per se. He analyzes how the army blames the low-ranked soldiers rather than questioning why such breaches of conduct happen in the first place. In Greengrass’ *Green Zone*, a work of fiction, the journalist who writes about the WMD and with her article manufactures their existence in the U.S. reader’s mind does not seem to feel remorseful for writing about something that she did not verify. The information matters, but its provider? Not necessarily.

War films that discuss the war correspondent’s presence at the front are usually directly linked to the soldiers’ stories. Apart from one example, *Live from Baghdad*

(2002), where American soldiers rather than Iraqi ones are invisible, all Iraq War films show journalists embedded in the armed forces. These films locate the journalists then usually in the company or aid of American soldiers, and emphasize their both self-designated and appointed by the third party mission to write the “truth” about the war. Thus, working around the military, which necessarily aims to reinforce the propaganda prerogatives, the journalists need to shield themselves with skepticism towards everything that would turn them into arrogant cynics. The enemy is never really just an enemy, as the war correspondents need to be “objective,” and thus try to understand the war from both sides. The Iraqis, then, are usually shown in these films as the victims of American politics (futilely raising against Saddam, losing their households – the war targets civilians, and suffering the results of the U.S. establishing the ethnically dividing governments upon their country). The war correspondents are portrayed as always motivated to get the story, have the freshest scoop that would make them best in their job. These stories are often laced with humor and irony as the journalists’ drive and frustration to get ever more provocative news are often linked to devious acts they commit.

#### **4.1 The war correspondents in the World War II and Vietnam War**

While there are not many WW2 films that feature the job of a war correspondent, there are some that pay respects to this profession. The first film is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), inspired by Vincent Sheean’s memoir *Personal History*. Walter Wanger, the film’s producer, chose to make a loose adaptation of the memoir, transposing the Spanish Civil War of Sheean’s book to a fictionalized Europe on the brink of war (the film was made in late 1939 and opened in August 1940). Although



made and released early in the progress of war, it managed to capture the atmosphere of the war. This atmosphere is also reflected in film's ideological standpoint: at the very end of the movie, London is bombed (and would be bombed soon after the film's release) and the film declares that America has the last "lights left in the world" before running "The Star Spangled Banner" as the soundtrack to the end credits (and soon, the America's help would be perceived as bringing back this "light" to Europe).

The film opens with a dedication to the "foreign correspondents" who are the "intrepid ones" in being the eyes and ears of America. While people in the U.S. are "seeing rainbows," only the outspoken and honest reporters can make them notice the coming clouds of war. Correspondents are the ones who record "angels among the dead and dying". Despite all these pompous and patriotic premises, Hitchcock's propaganda (Goebbels himself praised the film for propaganda employment) contains more than a touch of ironic insolence in its portrayal of the war correspondents. The main character Johnny Jones (Joel McCrae), a journalist working for the New York Globe, is about to lose his job, apparently for his temperamental personality, when his editor invites him to become a foreign correspondent in London. The editor looks for someone "who doesn't know a difference between an -ism and a kangaroo," an honest and good reporter rather than a knowledgeable and experienced journalist. This is the first time the film lets the audience know that the war correspondents are not really providing people with any proper information: the editor is sarcastic when he claims that he could learn more about Europe from a crystal bowl than from reports of another, frequently mocked war correspondent in the film – Stebbins (Robert Benchley). Although he is sent to Europe, Jones "didn't give much thought" to the impending war, leaving him with the "fresh, unused" mind that the newspaper could use in analyzing the conflict.

*Foreign Correspondent* shares much of its features with the spy genre of the time. As America did not enter the war until mid-1941, many pre-US entry war films focused on the possible U.S. contribution to war through infiltrating the spy groups. Hence, in telling the spy stories films such as *Espionage Agent* (1939), *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) or *Maltese Falcon* (1941) combine the generic components of a war film, melodrama, and film noir. *Foreign Correspondent* must be then put somewhere between the borders of these mixing genres; the early classic Hollywood films often used to have many components to the story (drama, romance and war being closely connected), and as Hitchcock's film is the first of WW2 to focus solely on the war correspondent character, it is also a distinctive contribution to the understanding of how the journalist films is functioning within the wider ensemble of the war films.

Once America declared war, correspondents' role gained further meaning and appreciation. The most popular correspondent of the time was Ernie Pyle, embedded with the troops, who wrote about the everyday struggles of soldiers in a manner that humanized the war for those far away from its center. Despite Pyle's always being alongside soldiers who slowly naturalized the thought of killing, Pyle himself could not accept it as he—professionally a journalist not a soldier—failed the transformation to be like a soldier, thus, his remarks, devoid of judgment, prove that the journalist are somewhat “resistant” to the morality of war:

The most vivid change is the casual and workshop manner in which they now talk about killing. They have made the psychological transition from the normal belief that taking human life is sinful, over to a new professional outlook where killing is a craft. To them now there is nothing morally wrong about killing. In fact it is an admirable thing. I think I am so impressed by this new attitude because it hasn't been necessary for me to make this change along with them. As a noncombatant, my own life is in danger only by occasional chance or circumstance. Consequently I need not think of killing in personal terms, and killing to me is still murder. (Pyle, 1986: 103-105)

*Ernie Pyle's Story of G.I. Joe* was released in 1945, shortly before Pyle's death.

The film made a star out of Robert Mitchum, who played Lieutenant Bill Walker, the soldier whose path always crosses with Pyle's (Burgess Meredith). Genre-wise,

according to Basinger's criteria, *Ernie Pyle's...* is a typical WW2 combat film: credits unfold military reference, men are on a mission led by a hero (Mitchum), an observer figure (Pyle), soldiers undergo a cinematic battle, some shots are actual war footage, and so on. Pyle is not portrayed as a war hero, but rather emphasizing the soldiers' role:

That is our war and we will carry it with us as we go from one battleground to another until it's all over. We will win. I hope we can rejoice with victory, but humbly. That all together we will try. Try out of the memory of our anguish to reassemble our broken world into a pattern so firm, so fair that another great war can never be possible. For those beneath the wooden crosses, there is nothing we can do, except perhaps to pause and murmur, 'Thanks pal, thanks.'

*Ernie Pyle's...* glorifies the role of a war correspondent by showing the war as the gloomy and deathly enterprise that not many would have had the courage to report. Although Pyle's story is overshadowed by the soldiers' drama, it exists due to his endeavor. The film itself is a tribute to the war correspondent, the only film on WW2 war correspondents that would attain such a tone.

Among the WW2 films that featured the character of a war correspondent, many portrayed him as a hero (often circumstantial), a U.S. supporter and a patriot, who easily falls in love, usually with the "wrong" person (brother's girlfriend, villain's daughter, foreigner, coworker). Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* draws on aspects of ideological propaganda while also reclaiming these generic conventions of the spy story (an affair with an improper girl) and the glorification of journalist job in the wartime, but his film also approaches the media with a dose of irony. *The Story of G.I. Joe* is the only WW2 film to break these classical Hollywood conventions of the spy-correspondent-film and the only one really set in the warzone. The WW2 films that continue to this day have not produced more portrayals of war correspondents at work during the conflict, suggesting level of objectivity in its representations.

Vietnam War films cover the subject of the war correspondents differently, shifting the focus from an independent correspondent to a military journalist or a

subjective media reporter, making them secondary characters. For example Joker in *Full Metal Jacket* emerges as the protagonist in the second part of the film, but it is not his job as a military journalist that defines the plot. Vietnam films do not do justice to journalists – they are present in the orbit of the war, but they rarely occupy the main position in cinematic narrative. That is not to say, however, that there were no films featuring war correspondents / photographers / photojournalists in the time of the Vietnam films highest proliferation (1970s and 1980s), but they can hardly be assumed to be films on the Vietnam War per se. For example, Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975) tells a story of a British-American journalist making a documentary around the civil war in Chad; Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981) focuses on an American journalist during the Russian Revolution; Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) features a reporter in 1960s Indonesia; and Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986) treats a journalist's job during the Salvadoran Civil War. All these films portray the work as difficult yet important, with an essential function to obtain information from repressive countries with the highest levels of censorship.

The issue of Vietnam films' relationship with journalists opposes the common belief that the war was lost due to reporting that divided policymakers and media (Hallin, 1986: 210). Often referred to as the first living-room war, Vietnam War was supposedly "the most visually represented war in history" even considering the Gulf War as an indication (Anderegg: 2). The previous chapter recalls also the words of Michael Anderegg who claimed that the Gulf War and any subsequent war would not be "visually and aurally 'present,' as thoroughly documented on film and tape, as was the Vietnam War" (2). The films presented here on the Vietnam War coverage of events and the ones on Iraq Wars will find a flaw in Anderegg's belief. Although the Vietnam War saturated the media, it was an anti-war saturation, especially since 1968, and it was

accompanied by the government's extension of news control. It is surprising, then, that none of the films to my knowledge show *how* the war "was lost due to media" – quite conversely, these films neglect the media or criticize them for taking a position that they do not fully understand.

In *Full Metal Jacket* the viewer can see Joker talking to Lieutenant Lockhart about news reporting, a conversation that shows the military applying both censorship and propaganda in their texts. Lockhart comments on how to finesse the writings: "substitute 'sweep and clear' in place of 'search and destroy'," "where's the weenie? The kill. The grunts must have hit something," "we run two basic stories here. Grunts who buy toothbrushes and deodorants for gooks: 'Winning the Hearts and Minds' and combat action resulting in a kill: 'Winning the War'," "rewrite it with happy ending, say one kill (Grunts like reading about dead officers)". It was common practice in the U.S. media to self-censor during the Vietnam War; as Hallin noted, television coverage "dehumanized the enemy, drained him of all recognizable emotions and motives and thus banished him not only from the political sphere, but from human society itself" (158). No wonder then that both media and film echoed the image of the North Vietnamese as a "fanatical gook," lower even than a criminal seeing him as "vermin" (Hallin: 158).

Another war journalist appears in *Apocalypse Now*, a photographer (Denis Hopper) based on Joseph Conrad's harlequin in *Heart of Darkness*. When Willard (Martin Sheen) first sees him, he is covered with cameras, epitomizing the media's schizophrenic approaches in connecting the pro and anti-war attitudes. Hopper's character admires Kurtz, a distraught barbaric officer, speaking of him in terms of a mystical being. In many ways Hopper's character represents the failure of media, which gets easily swayed in one direction. Kurtz is trying to prove that there is some meaning

in the demoralized world of war, and he drags with him others who just like him need to believe in the sense of their violent endeavors.

As Tony Williams noted, the 1970s and 1980s are full of narratives that show the media as “untrustworthy, unreliable, and uninformed” (122). In John Wayne and Ray Kellogg’s *The Green Berets* (1968) the character of a journalist, George Beckworth is being shown in the beginning as rather skeptical towards America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Beckworth admits openly that his newspaper does not believe that the U.S. soldiers should be in Vietnam as their presence only brings more brutality. He changes his view drastically, however, as he experiences the soldiers’ struggles in Vietnam first-hand. In one of the last scenes the viewers can see him joining the army as, after a second of doubt, he goes in the direction of war, in which now he clearly believes. Tony Williams thought that both *The Green Berets* and the later Vietnam films repeated this image of press in a destructive and one-dimensional fashion. *FMJ* presented press as “cosmically absurd,” *Apocalypse Now* as easily influenced, and *The Green Berets* recognized them as really redundant since the journalists do not comprehend the army’s work in Vietnam (Williams: 122).

WW2 films show war correspondents’ work as credible, sometimes even admirable. Except the character of Ernie Pyle, war correspondents are not shown in combat sequences, dealing instead with politics and spies. This changes in Vietnam films, but the purpose of locating the journalist in the battlefield is totally different. Vietnam films, contrarily to WW2 films, place the journalist in combat, but only to prove to the journalist that the idea he has about the war is misshaped by the liberals back at home. Both WW2 and Vietnam films, however, often ignore the role of the media and the job of journalists as irrelevant to the course of war and order of events.

This changes only later with the start of the Gulf War and the extension of media's influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 4.2 The Gulf War

Proclaimed as the first postmodern war, the Gulf War was saturated in the media. It is not surprising, then, that films about the Gulf War acknowledge the media's role in it. Where WW2 films placed war correspondents in the role of the spies or observers, and Vietnam films showcased journalists as destructive and ignorant to the daily tasks of the soldiers unless they had a chance to experience them first hand, Gulf War films grant much more power to the media. Ultimately, the truth and war become entangled together in the Iraq War films. The journalists are portrayed as helpful in uncovering the truth, heroic and able to influence people about the "reality" of war.

The war correspondents' main mission is to report from the war zone. In already discussed film, *Courage Under Fire*, the main character (Denzel Washington) tries to figure out the truth about an officer, Katherine Walden, who had died in ambiguous circumstances. While the main character himself is implicated in the unclear situation that led to the soldier's death, he becomes himself an object of a reporter's pursuit. Eventually he needs to reach out to the reporter to reveal the truth about the accident that led to shooting a U.S. tank with friendly fire, and in exchange he gets the location of one of the soldiers from Walden's team. While the film is not treating on the subject of a journalist's work directly as the reporter is not the main character in the film, his role is crucial to uncovering the truth about the war and army's fabrications.

David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (1999) adopts a more critical tone to America's involvement in Middle East politics. It is a hard film to classify, as it includes military combat yet its action is placed post-war, after the USA and Iraq had signed the ceasefire.

Technically, then, the soldiers are no longer in the war zone. The film's political stand and its tone, at times humorous and cynical, make the film a subtle satire. Russell employs a variety of different measures in achieving a generically mixed film about the war: a black comedy featuring action heroes, a humanized Other and discussions of the political motives behind the war. The "truth" about the war is scattered throughout the film and not as focused on the media like the other films that will be analyzed here, but still important and influential.

*Three Kings* tells a story of four greedy soldiers – Major Gates (George Clooney), Sergeant Elgin (Ice Cube), Reserve Sergeant Barlow (Mark Wahlberg) and Private Vig (Spike Jonze). The film begins with soldiers celebrating "another day of living," dancing and drinking in the base to mark the ceasefire. During those celebrations Gates is shown having casual sex with a reporter (Judy Greer) with whom he shares information about the war. He gets caught as the other journalist (Nora Dunn) comes to claim him as her "escort". The women are shown in a competitive relationship contesting who will get better news. This type of corporate and sexual battling the other over the "hotter" and "fresher" news is one of the main engines forcing the journalists to push themselves further into the combat. It is also quite unconventional for Russell to make the two main war correspondents women, as it is bringing the issue of sleeping with sources and questioning the dynamic between the masculine soldiers and their sexual needs in the warzone. Although female journalists are more "present" in Iraq films, it is still an innovation for the war film genre in general to place women in the war zone (and yet again, the film is technically set post-war). The journalists take video recordings of the soldiers' celebrations and yet still look for some more juicy news to cover, thus acting typically like the journalist harpies.



The main task of soldiers since the war has finished is to arrest prisoners of war. Russell employs black humor in scenes where Private Vig refers to the Iraqis as “coons” and “sand niggers” and is corrected by Elgin who scolds him to rather call them “camel jockeys” and “towelheads” – after all, the “aggression” is over. In one of the searches soldiers end up finding a piece of paper in one of the soldier’s rectum and decide to figure out on their own what does the paper say. They expect it to be secret information about gold that Iraqis had stolen from Kuwait, and see in this the opportunity to get rich. This is where Gates joins them and the scheme begins. Although the soldiers decide at first just to take gold and get back to their base, they get involved in domestic affairs between civilian rebels beguiled by the hope that America will help them overthrow Saddam. Here the situation gets tricky: soldiers fire even though they have no right to do so, and they kill some of the Iraqis while one of their own gets captured. Iraqis naively think that the U.S. attack on Saddam’s soldiers means that now they can overthrow their dictator. Soldiers realize along the way that they are not helping anyone in Iraq withdrawing directly after freeing Kuwait. The film shows that George H. W. Bush’s speeches, then, succeeded in igniting Iraqi resistance against Saddam, convincing Iraqis that they had the support of the U.S. government, and yet then failing in providing those who resisted help, leaving them alone doomed for Saddam’s retribution.

In the meantime, the reporter that Clooney’s character sent away gets impatient and frantic. In the scheme designed by Gates she is sent to a bombed oil plant, where the oil-soaked pelicans slowly die. She weeps while looking at the birds, but only so that she can get a hold of the desert patrol vehicle and blackmail the soldier to reveal the true location of Gates. When she reaches Karbala she reports that the Iraqi troops are holding her captured. Iraqis discuss Cruz’s looks commenting that she looks shorter

in person (the Iraqis watch the same news coverage as the Americans). Then they simply take her materials away and throw her out of Karbala.

As the soldiers' plans get more complicated they must call in for backup. Gates calls his assistant to bring trucks, Humvees, and the journalist as they need all the aid they can get in helping the Iraqis cross the border to Iran. Cruz, jealous of younger reporter, rushes to help and is eager to film the refugees trying to escape. She comments on the situation, as it is – the U.S. soldiers are not supposed to escort anyone to the border, yet they do so in an attempt to save the rebels' lives. The military leaders manage to catch up and arrest them before they help the Iraqis cross. "Three kings" eventually realize that their greed is nowhere near as important as helping someone during this war rather than just the interests of their government, and they agree to reveal the gold's location in exchange for letting the Iraqis pass. The army is threatening them with a court martial, but thanks to the journalist and her reportage they get honorably discharged. Once again, the media hold the real power as they triumph over the military's laws.

Russell's film is showing how the Gulf War mistreated Iraqis. Even the torture scene with Wahlberg's character emphasizes the Iraqis' justifiable anger. The soldier who interrogates the captured American mentions that during the bombings, he lost his 1-year old child. In his private vendetta against the U.S. establishment he asks why the Americans came to help Kuwaitis, who have oil, rather than other oppressed nations in the world, which do not have Iraq's valuable resources. Other Iraqis that the soldiers meet on the road cheer "Welcome America" in hopes of help in overthrowing Saddam. In one scene even Gates himself gets so heated up that he tries to recruit Iraqis in the case against their government shouting, "George Bush wants you," "America will follow you" and "God bless the free Iraq." These sorts of anti-war statements: showing

how the war only harmed Iraqis, mocking the American freedom principles, and emphasizing both greed of the establishment and individual soldiers – come across as bold and radical for the Hollywood film.

Genre-wise, *Three Kings* is positioned somewhere between a combat film, heist movie and an action flick, making it the most conventionally mixed film among the Iraq films. Eberwein noted that with *Kings*, the viewers “must understand the transformation of genre conventions as a reflection of Russell’s desire to ground events in history and expose the actual truths about our involvement in the war” (131). This type of genre mixing is itself a refusal to respect the conventions of the war genre, which assumes certain verisimilitude to the war cinema. To a certain extent, which the previous chapter proved as well, Iraq films undermine many traditional war film conventions, but the transformation of genre’s own features happens to every war film, e.g., WW2 films will always undergo innovations (e.g. *Inglorious Basterds* [2009]).

While *Kings* is then clearly reflecting this postmodern visual influence on the war, and showcasing how the war film genre transforms, the television features still prefer more traditional approach to the genre (as they approach different type of audience), yet change the narrative to befit the conditions of the “new” war, as the Gulf War can be seen. *Live from Baghdad* (2002) is an HBO feature that focuses solely on the work of journalists. It is the most comprehensive war film that presents the reporters’ job at the war zone. Based on Robert Wiener’s memoir, it tells the story of a CNN crew in Baghdad at the time of the Gulf War. Nowadays, with CNN an established network, not many realize the role the coverage of the Gulf War played in asserting CNN’s position in the market. The film shows different work of the war correspondent than was shown in previous war films; here, the team of reporters functions like an organism: there are producers, cameraman, sound technician, interpreter, and executives in the

U.S. This team consists of the main characters portrayed as partially responsible for the saturated coverage of war.

The main character is Robert Wiener (Michael Keaton), who goes to Iraq as an executive producer for CNN news. His employers are doubtful of his journalistic judgment, but they are convinced that he has the guts to do the job properly. Along with him comes Ingrid Formanek (Helena Bohnam-Carter) – responsible for production, Mark Biello (Joshua Leonard) –cameraman, Judy Parker (Lili Taylor) – sound technician, and reporters: Bernard Shaw, Richard Roth and Peter Arnett. The group obtains apartments in the Al-Rasheed Hotel from which they report most of the news. At first their whole enterprise seems a little bit disorganized: they hire an Egyptian student whom they find at the hotel to be their interpreter, they act rather arrogant towards the Iraqi government representatives, and they manufacture their news on the basis of what is shown in Iraqi TV. One such story, produced hastily from Iraqi material, involves news about Saddam Hussein's meetings with "guests"—people who have to stay in Iraq because they were denied exist visas. CNN's "story" is to say that in Iraq these men are called "guests" and everywhere else they would be termed as "hostages". Other journalists in the hotel mock them, calling their reportage "bullshit" because it lacks any sort of interpretation.

The journalists go on to look for "stories," but they only find success when Wiener forms an alliance with the Deputy Minister of Information, Naji Al-Hadithi (David Suchet). One of their successful stories, an interview with an American guest/hostage named Bob, immediately precedes the interviewee's disappearance. Naji informs Wiener with a cautious nod that Bob is safe, and sends the CNN crew to shoot a story on baby incubators in Kuwait. They become the first journalists to enter occupied Kuwait, but their story ends in fiasco as they attempt to get more information

that the Iraqi government would like them to obtain. Eventually, however, CNN becomes the favorite of both Al-Hadithi and, assumedly, Saddam Hussein's, and the latter agrees to be interviewed by the network. After the interview Wiener realizes that the potency of news in Baghdad was exhausted and that now "only war" can be the news.

At some point the viewer can assume that the CNN crew wants the war to start. They embody the same corporate urge to be the first and the best in the news reporting as we see in the journalists in *Three Kings*. At first they try to get the news and interviews, claiming that the media can help prevent the war and help both sides to communicate, but in the end it turns out just to be the façade and that all they want is to get more provocative material. They manage to get a four-wire circuit from Al-Hadithi and transmit their reports to CNN's base more easily. At first the Iraqi government does not interfere in the journalists' news reporting, calling them "fair and balanced," but when Al-Hadithi learns about the real usage of four-wire he scolds Wiener's group. Eventually, when war erupts due to Saddam's obstinacy to withdraw from Kuwait, the CNN crew is left alone in Baghdad. The sudden lack of competition allows them finally to pull through and be the brave ones who stay in the war zone and risk their lives so that people can actually understand the consequences of not accepting America's ultimatum. In one of the very last scenes, Wiener talks with Al-Hadithi while strolling through the devastated city. Surrounded by debris, Al-Hadithi says that they have become friends and that the CNN crew "got their story," to which Wiener replies that it was not the story he wanted. When Suchet's character hears that, he only asks, "Isn't it?" rendering Wiener speechless for a moment.

CNN was indeed the only network that reported the bombing of Baghdad live. The film emphasizes the importance of this reporting, depicting both Bush and Saddam

attentively watching CNN's live broadcast during the bombing. The journalists are excited and thrilled to be at the center of events, sharing the oft-repeated attitude of soldiers in combat: war is hell, but is also exhilarating. Keaton's character comes off as overconfident and insolent in that he only cares about getting the news. Although he has a family, he prefers to stay in Baghdad and risk his life along with his crew's for the purpose of giving something fresh to the CNN viewers. Even though he gets to the bunker, and the correspondents are reporting the events, Wiener feels like he should be a part of combat-reporting experience. The reporting from bombings is not uncommon – since the invention of the radio it has been done often, for example during Germany's attack on London in 1940. Such a scene can be seen in Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent*, where Jones does not stop his broadcast despite bombs hitting the building.

Wiener, however, is not motivated by the notion of telling the truth or taking a stand. The film emphasizes that the only thing that matters to him is the story itself. Raw, unreported event is to him the most challenging thing – he wants to report everything first-hand. Unlike Jones, Beckworth or Joker, Wiener does not care about the U.S. motivations for the war. Iraqis have their dignity, Al-Hadithi says, and Americans do not genuinely care for Kuwaitis, but they do care about the oil that they have. Wiener does not show any partiality either way, although some of his team members refer to Iraqis as “Ali Babas” and just in case teach him how to say in Arabic “don't shoot, I'm a journalist”. Wiener can be compared with Bigelow's adrenaline junkie James, who also shows no interest in politics, but only in disarming the bombs for the sake of it.

Media during the Gulf War were not as negative towards the U.S. government as they became in the subsequent war with Iraq. Undeniably, however, it must be noted

that the very fact that the Gulf War was the first postmodern war made the films about it acknowledge media's work in a much more comprehensive way. Whether it was negative or positive then, it did not have to matter for films, but to underline the presence of journalists became one of the most important tasks to the filmmakers.

What Gulf War films reveal is not only that the journalists become noticed, but also that they are a part in *manufacturing* the war's existence in the popular imagination to a much greater than they were in WW2 and Vietnam films. The war itself lasted a bit more than a month and was executed almost without soldiers, as the airstrikes did not require using the troops Bush sent to Saudi Arabia. The journalists displayed everything that was displayable and fought for a greater piece of news than the war could give. This eagerness for capturing more news led them to reveal more about the war than was necessary, and yet at the same time it produced so much news that it seemed there was nothing of which the public was not aware. Even though it would seem that the Gulf War was substantial in understanding the reality of war, it was merely a prelude to fathoming the power and influence of media.

#### **4.3 The Iraq War**

The Iraq War films discussed in the previous chapter exhibit an interest in the media's role similar to what we see in the Gulf War films. Just as CNN affirmed its position in the market during the Gulf War, Arabic channel Al Jazeera proved its importance during the Iraq War. In *Control Room* (2004), a documentary dedicated to the channel's work during the war, director Jehane Noujaim explains the role that the channel played in presenting the Iraqi side of war, arguing that American news outlets focused mainly on the U.S. side of war and ignored the bombings and killings of Iraqi

civilians. The U.S. government was critical of Al Jazeera, claiming that it had a propagandist nature (e.g. Donald Rumsfeld's speeches to this effect are shown throughout the film). Al Jazeera often showed dead Iraqi bodies, while CNN and other American broadcasting stations mainly focused on stories of fallen U.S. soldiers. In *Control Room* the viewers can hear an American soldier, who admits that even when the American networks show the Iraqi "collateral damage" they do not experience the same feelings as they do when they see dead soldiers. He expressed belief that for Iraqis it must be same when they watch in Al Jazeera the victims of American bombings. Assumedly each side presents the news for their own nation, being at the same time responsible for linking the homeland and its main ideology to the creation of national identity.

Genres are often linked to this creation of national identity, and consequently, the media's way of shaping information by setting it in a proper context builds an understanding of the broader community. Although the understanding of nationality becomes more complex in the postmodern world due to the ever-expanding imagined community, it still plays a significant role in third-world countries. Nationalism still remains crucial especially in the areas ethnically divided as in the case of Iraq, and recently there are proofs of attaining the power through various technological innovations as the terrorists gather up with usage of social media. Rather than to nationally unite the Iraqis, however, these groups get together in connection to a concrete ideology and beliefs. The work of Arabic media, then, during the Iraq War managed to ignite hate rather than work as cement to unite the ethnic groups in the country. This animosity is often justified in Iraq films though it is never presented as acceptable. For example, in de Palma's *Redacted* the Iraqi media are showing American soldiers' hostility towards the Iraqis. Every time de Palma shows Iraqi news, the subject



is an attack perpetrated by U.S. soldiers: shooting a pregnant woman, raiding a household at night, covered up murder of a girl and her family. Even though Al Jazeera workers claim in *Control Room* that their goal is to show people the “truth,” the documentary itself argues that objectivity is merely “a mirage”. Is there any possibility of showing the truth about war? Can media be a third party totally outside of nationalist discourse?

Dan Murphy (Daniel Lewis), a CIA operative in Philip Haas’ *The Situation* (2006) tries to emphasize that there is no “one truth”. Angry with his colleague, who just arrived in Iraq and who still sees matters as black and white between Americans and Iraqis, Murphy argues that there is no truth, and that it is all relative:

There is no truth, you know. It’s not about locking up all the bad guys. It doesn’t work like that. There are no bad guys and there are no good guys. It’s not grey either. It’s just that the truth shifts according to each person you talk to. And as the truth shifts it gets obscured on another layer of agenda. Intelligence is about being able to see accurately in any one moment why someone is doing something. On either side of that moment in a different circumstance you may not be able to interpret what you see, but if you can get a chance at it just once then you might have a chance at interpretation. If you never see it you’ll never be able to guess anything. (...) There is no truth because it’s lost in a fourth dimension of time. And just when you think you understand it, it’s passed. The game’s a kaleidoscope.

Even though *The Situation* tried to emphasize that these overdrawn conflicts do not come from nowhere, it still failed to surpass a stereotypical portrayal of American soldiers and Iraqi insurgents. As the main character, journalist Anna Molyneux (Connie Nielsen) follows the events in U.S. occupied Iraq, specifically in Samarra, she engages more and more in the daily lives of Iraqis who help her as interpreters, photographers, and sources. The film starts when an American major throws two 16-year old Iraqi boys into the river. One drowns, while the other gets to tell the story of the violent U.S. major. Anna tries to report the event to the American media, and as she gets renown for her “objectivity” (reporting the U.S. hostilities against Iraqis) she is granted an interview with the boy. This is where story shifts to Rafeeq, Anna’s main source. Rafeeq is an Iraqi veteran who fought in war against Iran and who is cynical about the U.S. “help”

in his country. While the Special Forces termed Rafeeq as an insurgent, Murphy wishes to see him in the role of an asset. The death of a boy provokes anti-American attitudes in Samarra, and attacks against the U.S. soldiers intensify. When Rafeeq dies, Anna is convinced it is because she tried to recruit him as a possible asset for Murphy. Along with her Christian friend, a photographer, she tries to get to the bottom of Rafeeq's death only to learn that it was an incompetent Iraqi policeman's personal vendetta for not letting him marry Rafeeq's daughter.

*The Situation* tries to depict how complicated matters in post-Saddam Iraq have become. The film shows that there are different sides to the stories and "situations" at hand. Although, then, the media report the events, the interpretations differ, leading to a kaleidoscopic understanding of events and identities. Even though Rafeeq was anti-American, he was not a terrorist like Walid (sympathetically portrayed at the end as he avenges Rafeeq) who continuously bombed the roads. And even Mayor Tahsin leads a police group that is supposed to keep peace among Iraqis themselves; they are corrupted and shoot the insurgents in the streets in cold blood. These Americans, however, are portrayed as most responsible for polarizing Iraqi society due to an incapacity to deal with the terrorists and their own men. Murphy tries to win "hearts and minds" by supplying Iraqis with medical equipment (specifically, incubators for children), but this gesture proves useless after American bombings cut off the city's electricity. Anna is portrayed as a decent and honorable journalist who does not wish to risk anyone's life in the course of her work, but even she resembles some features of a journalistic harpy when she narrates to herself the fatal bombing of an American Humvee saying, "This is no story."

Among the Iraq War films that focus on the journalists, *The Situation* has the most serious tone. There is no comic relief here, and no parody of other genres as in

other films. Despite that, *The Situation* reveals the similar attitude towards the truth and objectivity of fact that Hayden White shared claiming that human events do not have an objective reality apart from consciousness (1992: 37-53). The postmodern doubt as to whether reality is constructed as an objective negotiation of social and cultural rules mirrored by the mind, or an illusionary understanding of it and relative reading of “truth” leaks throughout the film. As Murphy suggests, the truth comes along with different interpretations in time and the task is not to get trapped in belief of one reality. *The Situation* discusses then the blurred line between obscured truth most openly making it film’s mission to emphasize how distorted the understanding of objectivity has become.

Another type of journalist is shown in Grant Heslov’s *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009). Both main character and narrator in the film is Bob Wilton (Ewan McGregor), a journalist for the Ann Arbor Daily Telegram (far-fetched premise: even a tiny paper sends a correspondent into war). He becomes motivated to go to Iraq as a correspondent after his colleague dies and his wife leaves him for his boss. These personal crises inspire him to reignite his career. Deciding to abandon his calm life he throws himself at the “great events in the history unfolding out there in the world”. Although other journalists in Iraq films do not have such background that would explain their determination to go to the war zone, it can be assumed from the tone of the film and peculiarity of Wilton’s character that he is the most “unfitting” journalist in the war zone in the sense that he has no experience in war, is fearful of combat, and lacks charisma. When his wife calls him to ask whether he has seen any combat Wilton replies that it has been pretty “hairy” over there and that he has seen things nobody should see. He lies to make himself look better and perhaps still get a chance to be with his wife, but only proves useless. Jealous of other embedded war correspondents who exchange “war stories” and constantly ignore him, he gets more frantic to get to Iraq to

redeem his own flagging self-esteem. Things change comes for Wilton when he stumbles upon Lynn Cassidy (George Clooney), a man he previously heard of to be the psychic spy. This is where story turns into a parody of a war film trivializing the war and mocking the army.

Lynn Cassidy, who agrees to take Wilton with him to Iraq, turns out to be a Super Soldier—a Jedi Warrior of the New Earth Army invented by Bill Django (Jeff Bridges). This introduces the story of the New Earth Army, told by the means of parody. Django, after falling from the helicopter in Vietnam, noticed that all of his men aimed high or pretended to be doing something else rather than shooting at the enemy. After coming up with a study that proved that only 15-20% of fresh soldiers shot to kill, he decided to use this “gentleness” as the army’s power. The soldiers were to implement love and peace in the corps and use their feelings to win the war. The New Age movement helped Django form his manual that would make the Jedi Warrior follow the footsteps of “Jesus Christ, Lao Tse Tung, Walt Disney.” Heslov’s film refers then to *Star Wars*, intertextually connecting the science-fiction war with the actual historical event. The Jedi soldiers, part of George Lucas’ hugely grown consumerist franchise, reversely dream of new America without an exploitative view of resources and no longer promoting the consumption at all costs. This paradox of a hippie soldier goes against the nature of war. As Fredric Jameson claimed, the postmodern era adapts the modern era of the past while ironically challenging its authority (Friedberg: 174). At the same point, then, the New Earth Army functions as the part of the system and the mocking of that system. This is necessarily related to the usage of genre playing on the subject of war, but I will go back to that in a moment. Django’s invented army is a part of greater military machine, existing due to the government politics, and yet the soldiers owe their purposeful being in the society and army to Mother Earth rather than to the

administration. There is evident cynicism here as Django's boys try to stop the war peacefully, but yet they belong to the apparatus that executes the war in the most violent way.

Wilton's trip with Cassidy, however, is not focused solely on problems within the New Earth Army itself, but rather a process of discovering what is wrong with the country. As he learns more about Cassidy's life and his presence in the army, Wilton discovers that the wrong people in positions of power tend to break the systems apart. Larry Hooper (Kevin Spacey), a sci-fi writer from Colorado and a new addition to the New Earth Army, tries to enhance his supernatural skills so that he would be the best in the army. While testing on a newly joined soldier, he ends up brainwashing the boy and leading him to go on an unplanned killing spree. Then, Hooper accuses Django of mistreating the members of the New Earth Army. Django gets a dishonorable discharge and the soldiers are adjoined to the regular forces. When Cassidy is asked to prove his skills by killing a goat with his supernatural skills, he contributes to the eradication of the New Earth Army by breaking the Jedi code and killing the innocent. Afterwards Hooper establishes his own division in army called PSIC, inventing creative solutions to the war on terror "without all that hippie bullshit". Hooper has ultimately infected the army with notion of abuse towards the Other and hate rather than Django's prevailing concept of love.

The story of the New Earth Army is thus indeed a parody, and even though it is not a blank parody, its satirical acuity and general framing suggest a parody inside of a pastiche. Heslov tells his story using the tropes from *Full Metal Jacket*, an important work for the Iraq films' directors. The character of Django is a reverted version of Sergeant Hartman: when he gives his speech to the recruits about love and peace, its setting is remarkably similar to the mise-en-scene in *FMJ*. And when the New Earth

Army is being disbanded, the soldiers undergo a transformation as shown in *FMJ*, their haircuts destroying their rights once and for all. It is yet again here then that the Vietnam film tropes are being reused to show how different experience is the Iraq War.

The pastiche and parody mixed together in Heslov's film take the seriousness of the Iraq War away, making the war seem not only irrelevant, but also nearly illusory. In one of the scenes, in which an "army small business" man is saving Wilton and Murphy, the viewers can hear that the goal is to improve the lives of Iraqis by selling them "cell phones, digital cameras, leisure suits" and bringing Starbucks and McDonald's. The man also refers to Iraq as the country of "Indians" reminding the viewers how Native American culture became a simulacrum of itself after the creation of reservations.

Heslov's film refers to combat similarly to *Jarhead* and *Three Kings*, both Gulf War films. It suggests the aptitude of the "postmodern" war where the war is only referent to itself. The only battle in the film, far from being truly cinematic, happens after the American "entrepreneurs" arrogantly get to the city and barge to the gas station scaring the Iraqis away. There is however, another American team nearby, and as both groups fail to recognize each other, they open fire. Then it turns out that both "fighting" sides are American and shoot at each other for no reason. As a result of this "battle of Ramadi" more than twelve people were injured, mainly locals. Like in many Iraq films then, damage is done by mistakes Americans inflict upon themselves. It was also presented in *Courage under Fire*, *Redacted* and will be further discussed in the context of Paul Haggis' *In the Valley of Elah*.

McGregor's character is more of an observer rather than an active counterpart discovering the "truth" about war. Unlike reporters in *Live from Baghdad* or *The Situation*, his main wish is to prove himself a man rather than to come up with the best

and freshest story. Even when he gets his report out and the “truth” about the New Earth Army, he is frustrated at how limited understanding the story got among the audiences. Most of the media just repeated his bit on how Iraqi insurgents are being tortured by listening to Barney the Purple Dinosaur.

And even if I needed proof of how Dark Side have taken the dream the beautiful dream of what nation could be and twisted it, and destroyed it. Well that was it. But I won't stop. I won't give up. Because when I look at what is happening in the world I know that now, more than ever, we need to be all that we can be. Now, more than ever, we need the Jedi.

In his last words McGregor is hinting that the world needs to go even to further lengths in uncovering the eccentricities in the army rather than believing lies that the people are fed with. To do so, however, is becoming the Jedi himself finally entering in his role of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

The Iraq War films that feature journalists mock reality and the way the system works. The journalists, despite being frantically driven to get the best material, discover the flaws of the government and mistakes made during the war. They prove that the truth and objectivity were lost somewhere along the way, complicating the understanding of right and wrong in the course of war. As the war gets more dubious and its justifications get obscured the journalists try to maintain a sense of accountability still reflected mediated through their own subjectivity.

The plots in Iraq War films often take a parodic attitude towards the war itself, on one hand mocking it and on another, turning it into satire. Unlike WW2 films and Vietnam films that feature the character of a journalist, they do not make a hero out of a correspondent nor do they blame the media for public misapprehensions about the war (with exception of *Green Zone*, but even there the journalist is not responsible for the manufactured lie of the U.S. government). Rather, they present the journalist as an ambitious, brave, and usefully skeptical person. Just as in Vietnam films the journalists

could not possibly comprehend the war, Iraq reporters are presented as nearly equal to the soldiers, and they see perhaps even more combat than the soldiers themselves.



## CHAPTER 5

### **THE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IN IRAQ WAR FILMS**

On June 10 2013 Daniel Somers, an Iraq War veteran of more than 400 combat missions, committed suicide. The heartbreaking letter that he posted online on the popular website Gawker revealed not only the problems that veterans come with from the warzone, including physical and mental illness, but also disillusionment with the government's role in reintroducing the veterans to civilian society:

My body has become nothing but a cage, a source of pain and constant problems. The illness I have has caused me pain that not even the strongest medicines could dull, and there is no cure. All day, every day a screaming agony in every nerve ending in my body. It is nothing short of torture. My mind is a wasteland, filled with visions of incredible horror, unceasing depression, and crippling anxiety, even with all of the medications the doctors dare give. Simple things that everyone else takes for granted are nearly impossible for me. I can not laugh or cry. I can barely leave the house. I derive no pleasure from any activity. Everything simply comes down to passing time until I can sleep again. Now, to sleep forever seems to be the most merciful thing.

(...) The simple truth is this: During my first deployment, I was made to participate in things, the enormity of which is hard to describe. War crimes, crimes against humanity. Though I did not participate willingly, and made what I thought was my best effort to stop these events, there are some things that a person simply can not come back from. I take some pride in that, actually, as to move on in life after being part of such a thing would be the mark of a sociopath in my mind. These things go far beyond what most are even aware of.

To force me to do these things and then participate in the ensuing coverup is more than any government has the right to demand. Then, the same government has turned around

and abandoned me. They offer no help, and actively block the pursuit of gaining outside help via their corrupt agents at the DEA. Any blame rests with them. (...)

Is it any wonder then that the latest figures show 22 veterans killing themselves each day? That is more veterans than children killed at Sandy Hook, *every single day*. Where are the huge policy initiatives? Why isn't the president standing with *those* families at the state of the union? Perhaps because we were not killed by a single lunatic, but rather by his own system of dehumanization, neglect, and indifference. (...)

Since then, I have tried everything to fill the void. I tried to move into a position of greater power and influence to try and right some of the wrongs. I deployed again, where I put a huge emphasis on saving lives. The fact of the matter, though, is that any new lives saved do not replace those who were murdered. It is an exercise in futility. (...)

Thus, I am left with basically nothing. Too trapped in a war to be at peace, too damaged to be at war. Abandoned by those who would take the easy route, and a liability to those who stick it out—and thus deserve better. So you see, not only am I better off dead, but the world is better without me in it (...)

I am free. (...)

Daniel Somers

Somers' letter, enumerating the struggles of a traumatized veteran, illustrates failure in dealing with PTSD. Many filmmakers, handling this difficult subject of a soldier coming home, tried to show how this pain manifests itself in the everyday life. Starting from the shell shock cinema to the Vietnam films, and finally in the Iraq War filmography, the new ego of the soldier, thrown into a "perpetual struggle to regain mastery and responds" and trying to reestablish his position in the society, became a haunting theme (Young, 1997: 89).

## **5.1 Vietnam War and before: defining the post-traumatic stress disorder**

The origins of talking about war trauma belong to the first films that were made on the subject of post-World War I distress. Labeled then as "shell shock," war trauma became one of the main themes when portraying the troubled soldiers. Especially in the countries that suffered the defeat most deeply, notably the Weimar Republic, World War I was depicted with great bitterness, opening the way to the discussion of

consequences that the war bears both on individual psyche of a soldier, his family, and society.

As Anton Kaes argues in his book dedicated to the shell shock cinema, World War I was the first war to show how destructive and cruel technological warfare has become. Kaes argues that a traumatic event such as war could become inscribed and stored in the body without the mind being aware of it (2009: 4), and he investigates how this traumatic experience was portrayed in the Weimar films. Similar to the popularity of Vietnam films in post-war America, in the years after the Great War, Germans were submerging themselves into the world of trauma. And while the U.S. Vietnam PTSD films can be considered more in terms of the therapy acknowledging the defeat in war and challenging the traumatized soldier to recover from his experiences, the Weimar films were often used in the purpose of mythologizing German power and raising feelings of unfairness and hatred. With this power of mythologizing, German shell shock films became a token of experiences of national loss and grief. Siegfried Krakauer claims that every Weimar post-war film implemented fascism in its core foundation, disclosing the political attitudes in the nation at the time. Although Kaes finds Krakauer's claim largely exaggerated, he is no less interested in finding out why post-war Germany ended up where it did. Where Krakauer, however, finds Weimar culture pre-fascist, Kaes sees it as post-traumatic (5).

The shell shock cinema of the Weimar Republic builds a set of conventions that would be used later in PTSD films. To better portray the various psychological states of mind, shell shock films introduced innovations in cinematic representations: fragmented story, distorted perspectives, rapid editing and harsh lighting effects. All these novelties participated in the development of a modernist film language (Kaes: 4). The narrative was also structured for the purpose of underlining the "broken" state of

mind of the veteran. Thus, the plot often focused on soldiers' experiences of loss and grief, and the action took place mainly at the homefront, underlining that the soldiers did not belong at home anymore—and that their place in the society was now missing, as in *Toward the Light* (1918) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). In terms of the dyad good soldier/evil enemy, Weimar films focused on inculcating nationalistic ideas in their viewers, generating enthusiasm for war and hatred for the enemy.

The very term “shell shock” was coined in 1915, when a medical journal described the blindness and memory loss in frontline soldiers as an effect of the heavy shelling (Kaes: 10). Although the soldiers had no physical wounds, the doctors assumed that the bursting shells must have affected them in yet undetectable way, speculating that their brains and spinal cords might have been damaged. The term was abandoned in the beginning of WW2 in favor of “postconcussive syndrome,” which still sought brain injury as responsible for the behavior of a traumatized soldier. It was not until 1980, however, that PTSD was identified as an anxiety disorder. Despite psychiatrists' efforts to define soldiers' trauma<sup>1</sup>—whether it's a stress response, an anxiety or dissociative disorder—the debate does not question that war affects a man. The effects of this war, as seen in cases of PTSD, are often symptomized by distressful re-experiencing of the traumatic event in forms of “dreams, flashbacks, and intrusive images,” numbing (e.g., loss of interest in previously found pleasurable activities), inclination to avoid situations that might prompt traumatic memories, and physiological

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<sup>1</sup> The first standardized nosology of PTSD was included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) in 1980. Unlike DSM-I, which termed PTSD as “gross stress reaction,” and DSM-II, which labeled it as “transient situational diagnoses,” DSM-III created space of the subject of traumatic memory, largely connecting the Vietnam War veterans' experiences with their difficult return to the society. And although the Vietnam War veterans were the main source of data analysis for the psychiatrists, PTSD is not solely a soldiers' ailment, extending its understanding to other victims of traumatizing experiences such as rape, plane crashes, car accidents, crimes, etc. Despite that, PTSD has been mainly used in context of war veterans, stereotyping often a “crazy soldier” with cases of PTSD.

arousal, characterized by sleep disorders, problems with concentration, irritability, and violent behaviors (Young: 107).

Films depicting WW2 (apart from documentaries) often fail to demonstrate the soldier's post-war distress. Especially in the U.S., the trauma of WW2 became the domain of Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. Furthermore, throughout the years the subject of WW2 trauma was nearly entirely seized by the Holocaust discourse. The Hollywood films that spoke of WW2 in general often concentrated thus on the combat and failed to portray soldiers' trauma after coming back home. The few Hollywood WW2 films that touch upon PTSD portray traumatized veterans as unappreciated and frustrated men who wasted their youth fighting instead of gaining experience that would allow them to be a part of the "American Dream" (*The Best Years of Our Lives* [1946], *It's Always Fair Weather* [1955]).

It was the Vietnam War that really developed the issue of the postwar stress in U.S. cinema. Over many decades, American soldiers that fought in Vietnam have been a recurring subject of popular films, books, and television. One of the most distinguishing themes that the Vietnam films featured was the issue of postwar trauma. PTSD became mainly associated with war veterans at the time, after many medical analyses explored how the Vietnam War affected the soldiers. Although the exact numbers vary as to how many veterans suffered from PTSD after the war, the understanding that it was combat that affected the soldiers the most continues to be prevalent claim in the psychiatric studies. The films that speak on the subject of Vietnam War PTSD acknowledge these examinations, and often contain a man's continuity in undergoing the PTSD (starting from his life before the war, often showing training, first experiences of battle, growing neutrality towards the war inflicted deaths, and problematic return to the society) that broke both mind and spirit of the soldier.

The difficult political situation in the U.S. during the Vietnam War created disparity in the society that caused many clashes between “anti-Communists” and pacifists who urged for the war to end. Pro-war presidents were continually elected in the Vietnam War years, indicating that voters were supporting the war, and the first inchoate anti-war movements were failing in reaching a critical mass that would push politicians to end American involvement in the war earlier. With the protests gaining more popularity, and new generation’s demands on peace, the society grew slowly fatigued with war. Then in the Nixon years, when the president decided to end the war in Vietnam, the anti-war pacifists were able to lessen their requests. Many protesters, however, continued their struggle against the government after the war by demanding better treatment for the veterans, keeping the subject of the traumatized soldiers on the surface of the war discourse.

The popularity of PTSD films in post-war America was reflected in many films and books that were created not only by veterans, like the aforementioned Gustav Hasford, but also by novelists and writers without direct war experiences. The Vietnam films, books and series manage to show PTSD from many angles: the disordering effects of Vietnam, mythologized “real” war, repentant victims and indoctrinated soldiers. Among the films that gained wide national acclaim are *Apocalypse Now*, *Birdy* (1984), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). Most of these films depict *individuals* rather than a group of traumatized soldiers trying to get back to their regular lives. The difficulty of dealing with those who came back became the national problem, and that, among many other factors (losing the war, growing inflation) contributed to the popularity of these films.

Self-destructive madness and a problematic return to civilian life is shown in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), a film released a year after the American

withdrawal from Saigon. An unstable and isolated veteran, Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), starts to see New York City as a hostile and dirty place. Slowly he gets more irritated with the immorality of the city and begins to feel as disgusted by it as he is by the thought of his Vietnam experience. Suffering from insomnia—one of the hallmark symptoms of PTSD—he starts to take night shifts and dreams about macabre things that he could do in the city. His rage results in violent revenge against an objectified city that becomes his new “filthy” enemy. Scorsese’s film indirectly portrays the chaos of Vietnam; politically perceptive, yet not directly discussing the validity of war, the film manages to illustrate how madness creates more madness. Stylistically, *Taxi Driver* takes much from shell shock cinema, especially significant strategy, as many early war films take advantage of a previous war’s established language and try to dress the new war experience in it. *Taxi Driver* references film noir, which was also heavily influenced by shell shock cinema and cinematic modernism. The voice-over narration, character’s alienation, low-key lighting, imbalanced world, and a duplicitous woman are among many features that *Taxi Driver* shares with film noir. The choice of film language helps to speak about PTSD; unlike other Vietnam films, at the same time it opens the discussion how to portray the war horror and its effects on human psyche.

Just as De Niro serves as a metaphor to understanding the disordering effects of war in *Taxi Driver*, he helps to mythologize the “real” war in Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (TDH) (1978), a film that distinguishes itself among many other Vietnam films in this mythologization of the main character and omission of political themes. Michael Vronsky (De Niro), the protagonist of the film, shares much in common with traditional Western heroes, which is the main reason why *The Deer Hunter* can be perceived as a film mythologizing the war. John Hellmann thought that Cimino’s film used the Western’s conventions for the purpose of playing on the motif of national

experience in terms of an American myth (58-59). And while the Western as genre has long been the epitome of the American myth in cinema, its position was weakened profoundly in the post-war era. The connection between *TDH* and the Western can be best seen in the conventional main character: he lives at the threshold of civilization in his small trailer, cares for ritualistic killing (deer should be killed by “one shot”), loves the “good woman” and would never give up on his folks. The wilderness landscapes clashed with industrial side of Pennsylvania, the male bonding, and situating the Viet Congs (VCs) in the category of the other also create the association between *The Deer Hunter* and Western. Although such association mythologizes Cimino’s portrayal of war, his film still stands on its own in the category of war experience and its subsequent trauma making *The Deer Hunter* one of the most upsetting and reverberating versions of the cultural myth.

The key moments of distress in *The Deer Hunter* comes as the Clairton soldiers are captured by the VCs and forced to play Russian roulette. Thanks to Vronsky’s efforts, they manage to get away, but eventually get separated during the military evacuation. Unaware of his companions’ whereabouts, Nick (Christopher Walken) gets dragged into the world of Vietnamese gambling. Suffering from survivor’s guilt, he becomes obsessed with Russian roulette and finds his new version of self to be nihilistic and alienated. Although it had been Michael who believed in the “one shot” ritual of killing the deer and the union between man and nature, after his war experience, traumatized Nick becomes obsessed with one shot and passivity (Hellmann: 66). After returning home, Michael continues to embody the Western heroes’ characteristics. First of all he feels he must bring peace to the community, and while doing so he sets out to find his two lost friends. In the meantime he refuses to have sex with the woman he loves—Nick’s abandoned fiancée—as he believes in the value of male loyalty and



comradeship. He first finds Steven, his friend whom he saved in the war. Mentally and physically broken, with his legs amputated, Steven does not wish to come back to town. Michael, however, forces him to get back and then goes on a self proclaimed mission to find and save Nick. He goes back to Vietnam, but when he finds Nick he cannot manage to get him out of his trance, and Nick succumbs to his last “one shot.” The trauma that all three men share results in different outcomes for them: although all of them withdraw from society to a certain extent, Michael recognizes his earlier violent obsessions of ritualistic killing (and endeavors to change himself); Nick becomes fixated on the idea of death; Steven comes back ruined and without a clear path back to his old life. The shattered innocence of men clashes with their earlier selves from before the war. When they come back they not only need to find a way to be a part of society again, but also there is need to initiate some of the heroism into the daily lives in order to preserve the community. When Michael brings back Nick’s body and they can finally mourn his loss, they gather together facing their trauma and realizing that they need to be the heroes on a daily basis now as they pronounce they love to homeland and nation spontaneously singing in the last scene “God Bless America.”

Another type of PTSD is shown in Ted Kotcheff’s *First Blood* (1982), the first film opening the John Rambo film franchise. Not a typical postwar film, and not even a typical PTSD film, *First Blood* features a character who is broken by the war and feels the need to refight it in the new frontier. The plot here is simple: the main character, John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone), goes to see his comrade from the war times, Delmore Berry, who turns out to be dead. Rambo gets upset that his only friend, who along with him survived the war, died a year later of cancer possibly caused by the “orange stuff” that American soldiers were spreading in Vietnam. Rambo then heads to the city, where he is caught by the local sheriff (Brian Dennehy). His long hair, jacket

with American flag and seemingly indifferent attitude make him “unwanted” in the town. The sheriff is prejudiced, for if he knew that Rambo’s flag is the token of his patriotism and his indifference is in reality the sadness caused by the newly discovered information about his friend’s death, and that Rambo is a Green Beret veteran, he might have been invited by the sheriff for a cup of tea rather than end up in jail. This all leads the traumatized Rambo to withdraw himself from society and plot his revenge against the American system that has only frustrated and disappointed him. In interpreting Rambo’s urge to get revenge, many have assumed that it was defined by his right-wing revisionism and militarism, making the cathartic revenge a compensation for post-defeat feelings of frustration and inadequacy (Hellmann: 140). As Hellmann noted, however, Rambo’s friend Berry was black, and Rambo’s silence in the face of the sheriff’s prejudiced hostility were a sign of loyalty towards Berry, who was the victim of a different kind of social discrimination (145).

Whether *First Blood* personifies the right-wing revenge fantasy or the liberal absolution of the hero, Rambo is still a mythical character for Vietnam War cinema. Like Travis in *Taxi Driver*, Rambo’s role in and after the war is to redeem the modern America from the industrial savagery. While Travis, however, sees the city and the modernity as the source of filth, Rambo decides to fight the modern man and his technology (which caused Berry’s cancer) from the wilderness. This fighting seems obsessive and to a certain extent maniacal, as Rambo’s perception balances his Vietnam experiences with his current situation. After all, his initial attack happens when the police officers at the station (treating him like many victims of the racial prejudice in the U.S. history) try to cut his hair. This cutting brings him back to his experience of being a VC’s P.O.W. However, as Michael manages to find his peace with nature and aims to control it in accordance to his code, Rambo uses nature to keep the power on

his side. And although Rambo realizes that it is man's use of technology that kills, he wants to be one with nature against the prejudiced and frustrated humankind. His trauma, then, ultimately reconnects him with nature against technologized civilization. Rambo is against man's self-destructive impulses; he turns out to be "an innocent victim of a faithless society," a victim who was tormented by the Other in Vietnam, and yet winds up more wronged by his "own society's betrayal of its cultural ideals of tolerance and equality" (Hellmann: 147). The other films in the Rambo series do not show him as broken as the first film – it is *First Blood* that best portrays Rambo's PTSD and explains its destructive influence. The very existence of four Rambo films,<sup>2</sup> however, hints at the notion that, as a now mythical character of Vietnam War, he serves a useful function in the postwar cultural imaginary.

The last type of Vietnam PTSD film focuses on the repentant victim. Here, the best example is Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). Based on the autobiographical book of a war veteran, Ron Kovic (played in the film by Tom Cruise), Stone's film recounts Kovic's disillusionment with the war experience. Stone, himself a war veteran, also made another war film about Vietnam, *Platoon* (1986), which was an innovative take on the combat film (as compared with the standard WW2 formula at the time). He knew that the Vietnam War could not be spoken of in terms of another war, and as his *Platoon* took another route at portraying combat, so did his adaptation of Kovic's book. *Born* is generically diverse: it is a war memoir, a critique of Hollywood's version of combat films, and a Vietnam version of the classical Hollywood take on the "returning veteran" (Doherty: 255). Despite the fact that not many film scholars yet perceive the PTSD films as a separate subcategory of war film,

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<sup>2</sup> The fifth film about Rambo, titled *Rambo: Last Blood*, is to be released in 2015.

or at least have not done so in analyses of Vietnam films, Stone's generic variety can be considered as typical for PTSD films.

Innocent and young Kovic dreams of becoming a soldier – he wants to fulfill his patriotic duties and “serve his country.” Once he manages to realize this dream and join the Marines, he is sent to the front, where his childhood innocence and naivety are lost. What he thought war would be like—killing the “bad guys”—turns out to be far from reality: he ends up participating in an accidental slaughter of a Vietnamese family and killing of one of his own comrades. Tortured with guilt, he confesses to his superior, but is treated with ignorance and anger. Eventually, he gets shot and damages his spinal cord. Upon coming back he learns that the U.S. government does not have enough resources to take care of the veterans. Covered in their own feces, the veterans lie in the hospital without proper care. Not only are their bodies neglected, but their shattered psyches suffer even more. Bestowed with this knowledge of maltreatment by the U.S. government, often ignored by his family and community, Kovic has no chance for a moral rehabilitation. Unable to have any future in a traditional and symbolic sense—he can no longer have children—he feels misplaced in the postwar world. His castration is displayed in the “penis scene” when he shouts at his mother that he will never be able to fulfill himself as a man. Eventually, disillusioned about the war and government, he compensates his emasculation (metaphorical castration) with the antiwar activity. Kovic can be rehabilitated then as he repents for his actions: first, he goes to see the family of the soldier he accidentally shot, and then, he calls for the end of war that kills innocent Vietnamese, rebuilding his masculinity through this new position of power.

The Vietnam PTSD films show quite a variety of both structures and filming techniques. Plots vary on the direct postwar experience of the soldier, with very few or no flashbacks (*Taxi Driver*, *First Blood*) or they extensively portray the prewar

experience, combat, and postwar trauma (*The Deer Hunter*, *Born on the Fourth of July*).

The filming recasts many techniques used in WW2 films, but often these are altered to showcase how different is the Vietnam War. As Doherty wrote:

It is, rather, to note one of the signature insights and legacies of Vietnam: the special relationships between war and cinema, particularly how the ethos of the World War II combat film proved so devastatingly inappropriate to the Vietnam experience. The notion of a world of simulacra and a "societe du spectacle" fashionable in Continental cinema theory misses a more profound truth communicated in a bumper sticker popular with veterans: "Vietnam was a war not a movie." (267)

Vietnam films are different from the WW2 films, and they are also distinctive for introducing and developing the subgenre of PTSD films. Although it is not yet fully recognized, discussed or analyzed, this category has been acknowledged within the wider genre of war films. For many years, Vietnam films were not seen in direct correlation with the post-traumatic experience (Morag, 2009: 153). Ignoring the trauma, film critics have often interpreted the Vietnam films in different ways, for example seeing *The Deer Hunter* merely as a masculine ritual of scarification for the good of the community, instead of seeing how war and trauma break apart the communities. Noting PTSD's influence on the veteran's psyche has become an important part of comprehending how the war affects the communities and the nation's collective memory. Such token characters as Vronsky or Kovic became its symbols and inspired the Iraq films' directors.

## **5.2 Iraq War: finding its own voice for war trauma**

In one of the opening scenes of *Jarhead*, Drill Instructor Fitch shouts at Swofford, asking whether his father served in Vietnam. Swofford says yes, and Fitch then asks if his father ever talked about his experiences there. Only once, Swofford says, and Fitch responds that it is good because it means he was not lying about it. This

brief conversation, not to say confrontation, hints at the trauma all soldiers might have experienced in Vietnam, and indicates that the truthful experience of war is the unspeakable one. In many films, the Vietnam veterans coming back are rarely seen talking about their experiences with their families, and even if they do, their words are met with a lack of understanding, mixed feelings of disgust and gloom, or assertions from their families that they do not wish to hear about it.

In the ending scene of *Jarhead* the soldiers come back from the Gulf War. There is a parade in the main streets and people cheer as the buses with veterans go through. Suddenly, a man gets on the bus. Wearing an old military jacket covered with medals, the man is clearly a veteran, and presumably a Vietnam veteran. He shouts “Semper Fi, Marines” and adds “you did it clean. You made us proud.” Then he starts shaking soldiers’ hands and suddenly breaks down, presumably thinking about his own war trauma. The viewers who have just experienced the Gulf War with the *Jarhead* characters know that the soldiers on the bus have no reason for “trauma,” at least not in the sense that the soldiers of Vietnam films (as described above) are presumed to have gone through. In Swofford’s voice-over narration, however, he concludes that every war is different, and also the same. Followed by the shots of his war companions going back to their regular jobs, and learning that his friend from the army just died, Swofford realizes that the soldiers might try to get back to their ordinary lives, but they remain jarheads. This reflection upon the soldier’s life, and the consequences the war brings on the soldier’s body, expose the misconceptions and paradoxes of the traditional outlook on PTSD. Although there is no drama of the “real” war in the Gulf War, as Baudrillard observed, people still wallow in the hallucination of violence. The soldiers, thus, are still psychologically damaged even though this destruction is not visible.

Is it then the war itself that affects the man? Or is it combat that causes PTSD,

as suggested by Vietnam films? Patriarchal discourse argues that young men are more prone to violence, since they are biologically programmed for hunting and fighting, and therefore a “real” man would not be traumatized for acting in accordance with his nature. It is shown, however, in most of the war films, that to become a soldier requires undergoing transformation, which undermines the claim that men are in default ready for battle. Especially in camp-to-combat films, where the training is depicted in line with the military’s prerogatives, viewers can experience this transformation. If this change is necessary for one to become a soldier, then the subsequent claim that it is war that changes the man is not sufficient in explaining the postwar trauma. Just as *Jarhead* suggests at the end, it is an impossibility to ever forget the war despite the conditions and execution of this war. Although the Gulf War is often seen as a non-war, and discussing the Gulf soldiers’ trauma in comparison to the Vietnam veterans might seem like a stretch, Hollywood movies still acknowledge this “stretched” trauma (e.g. *Courage Under Fire*). And yet, it needs to be noted that before Nixon ended the conscription, men did not have much choice in deciding whether they wanted to join the army. On some level the Gulf War soldiers might be considered better prepared for life in the army, for they choose it voluntarily; nonetheless, as the Iraq films prove, one can never be prepared for war.

Ron Kovic was a volunteer, and yet he could not have comprehended what going to war really meant. In his book Kovic mentioned how in the U.S. films, especially in Westerns that embodied the myth of American hero, it was always John Wayne versus everyone else. The cinema shows a clear border between the good guys and the bad guys (e.g. cowboys versus Indians), ultimately simplifying both fighting and war. For Kovic and many other soldiers, this cinematic bipolarization of enemy and ally, categories rendered equivalent in the warzone, made Hollywood the villain

and betrayer (Doherty: 258). In *Born* the viewers can see that the soldiers, under Kovic's leadership, kill the Vietnamese family by accident, and that Kovic himself shoots one of his men. Similarly the blurring of friend and enemy is also shown in many Iraq films: in *Green Zone*, for instance, an Iraqi helps the U.S. soldiers, while the government itself is the villain, forcing the war for the wrong reasons. This belief, then, that war is simple and just, as suggested by Kovic, is motivated by cinematic narrative. *The Green Berets*, which take much from the formula of a Western (it even features John Wayne as one of the main characters), prove that it is still possible to depict the war in a simple manner of showing the good and the bad guys. Interestingly, the character of John Wayne is mentioned in many of the PTSD films as if secretly admitting this villainy of Hollywood. *Taxi Driver*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Jarhead*, *Stop-Loss*... all reference John Wayne either directly (talking about him, comparing himself to him, showing his picture) or by associating the protagonist with him. Congruently, Stacy Takacs has observed similar correspondence in the war films of late 1990s and early 2000s, claiming that Hollywood again began producing films that would tout military technology and experience of "brotherhood" as if an attempt to rehabilitate the depraved war (as Vietnam was often represented) and justify why people should love the military again (2012: 13). Eventually, however, after seeing actual combat in the enemy's lands, soldiers begin to recognize war for what it is. This realization of war's nature disabuses the soldier of any notion that war could be an adventure. This disillusionment combines with the experience of war to produce the trauma of the soldier.

Every war is in its own way awakening, realizing that the war is not an adventurous enterprise, and brings trauma specific for its experience. With the Vietnam films the problem of PTSD became one the most important components of the war



cinema. As Raymond M. Scurfield noted, the negative stereotyping of Vietnam veterans has harmed many veterans who believe that the media dramatizations and representations of traumatized veterans were largely overblown (2004: 3). Despite these protests to stop equating the veteran with a traumatized and broken trouper, the numbers still show that more than half a million soldiers were negatively affected by the war (having a “full-blown PTSD” or “partial PTSD”).<sup>3</sup> The problem is that these images of traumatized veterans affected the American troops that served in Iraq, Afghanistan and even Kuwait. The PTSD left the orbit of Vietnam films to expand its influence on representations of subsequent wars. In *Courage Under Fire*, discussed in the first chapter, there are at least three soldiers with PTSD. And even the Iraq films, whether solely focusing on the problem of PTSD or not, acknowledge trauma extensively.

Most of the Iraq War films discuss the war trauma without focusing on the particular soldier’s psyche. The lack of films that would concentrate on an instance of one traumatized soldier, as it was in case of Vietnam War, might be still related to the fact that the Iraq films still strive to define its own conventions, and that the traumatized postmodern identity is even more fragmented than it was in case of Vietnam veterans. Within the Iraq War films genre, all types of films emphasize the traumatic nature of war. From the combat films to the homefront experience, the Iraq films illustrate examples of traumatized soldiers and nation. Perhaps only the journalists’ experiences are somehow devoid of trauma, suggesting that the media representatives are, as in cases of Vietnam films, harpies taking advantage of violent nature of war and suffering of the soldiers rather than becoming traumatized by seeing the destructive effects of

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<sup>3</sup> For the specific data, see Raymond M. Scurfield, *A Vietnam Trilogy. Veterans and Post-Traumatic Stress: 1968, 1989, 2000*. (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004).

war (e.g. in *Live from Baghdad* Michael Keaton's character sees bombed Baghdad, but as he notes earlier "only the war could be news now" anticipating that the coverage of bombing could lift the CNN's status in the media world).

The Iraq combat films, discussed previously, featured traumatized soldiers in many ways that coincide with the Vietnam PTSD classification proposed here: in showing the disturbing effects of war, repentant soldiers, and refighting the war. Starting from de Palma's *Redacted*, where McCoy comes back to the U.S. traumatized and disillusioned about the war, the distressing consequences of the war are visible. Not only McCoy is traumatized, but other soldiers are affected by the stress in the front as well. Flake and Rush get affected by the death of their sergeant, boredom of the daily routine and lack of "appreciation" from Iraqis. Especially after experiencing the death of their leader, they become more hateful and aggressive. Their inability to deal with this trauma causes them to raid a civilian house, rape a young girl and then kill the whole family. Other soldiers present at the crime scene, Salazar and McCoy, are also traumatized after witnessing the acts committed by Flake and Rush. It would seem then that there is a twofold trauma here. As Burgess et al. noted, many Iraq veterans used the "Vietnam Defense" of PTSD when justifying criminal acts (2009: 60). However, as difficult as it is to discover whether a man's trauma is the effect of war or whether the post-war behavior is just the consequence of the previously disturbed personality of a man, the fact remains that these traumas are destructive to society as a whole. Even though Flake and Rush's act did not directly affect the society back at home, the events reverberated, causing for condemnation of war in general and soldiers' conduct in particular. The disturbing effect of war is then one that hurts the society as a whole, and yet one that damages the society's units: the families. McCoy comes back broken and disillusioned not only disbelieving its government motives, but also wounding his

family life. The latter point can perhaps be better seen in *The Hurt Locker*, where sergeant James does not want to come back to his family. The destruction of family is also seen in *Courage Under Fire*, where the child loses its parent and is destined to grow up without a mother.

Iraq combat films also have a repentant soldier and one that is refighting the war. In *Courage Under Fire*, Denzel Washington's character is repenting for accidentally killing a soldier in his own ranks. At first, traumatized, he withdraws from family life, begins drinking and mourns the loss of his position in the army. He repents by investigating Walden's death, trying to understand how such situations happen at war. The soldier who refights the war is both James in *The Hurt Locker* and Miller in *Green Zone*. Although the latter one seems much less affected by the war (he is more of an action hero, like Rambo in the continuations of *First Blood*), and James is unmoved by the later recollection of the death of "Beckham," both are heroic at the same time debunking that there is something wrong with the society and government that send them to war.

Similarly to the combat films, homefront films depict the war trauma. In case of the latter ones, as the next chapter illustrates, this trauma is domestic and national rather than belonging to the soldiers exclusively. It is both the country and the families that suffer the losses and have to deal with the suffering. Perhaps only *In the Valley of Elah* is exceptional in combining PTSD with domestic trauma; while the family and the investigation of the soldier's death form the film's main focus, the individual war trauma is emphasized as well. Just as combat films suggest that the trauma is the domain of the soldier's psyche, homefront films argue that national trauma is no less important.

They are the first generation of young Americans since Vietnam to be sent into an open-ended conflict. Yet if the dominant mythology of that war turns on a generation's loss of innocence – young men reared on *Davy Crockett* waking up to their government's deceits while fighting in Southeast Asian jungles; the nation falling from the grace of Camelot to the shame of Watergate – these young men entered Iraq predisposed toward the idea that

the Big Lie is as central to American governance as taxation. This is, after all, the generation that first learned of the significance of the presidency not through an inspiring speech at the Berlin Wall but through a national obsession with semen stains and a White House blow job. Even though their Commander in Chief tells them they are fighting today in Iraq to protect American freedom, few would be shaken to discover that they might actually be leading a grab for oil. In a way, they almost expect to be lied to. (Wright: 20)

Thus begins Evan Wright's book on the American soldiers' experiences in Iraq War. It is a book about the generation "kill," and in his words, the generation of "America's first disposable children." Brought up on video games, hip-hop, Vietnam War myth, government scandals and general distrust towards the establishment, these soldiers' experiences have much in common with the Vietnam veterans, yet they reflect a different attitude. The depiction of trauma during the Iraq War is best illustrated in Kimberly Peirce's *Stop-Loss* (2009). Her film, a study of a generation doomed by the war, tells the story of three soldiers who return from a completed tour of duty in Iraq. Their return, however, is marked by the trauma they bring back, and worsened by the deception they experience from the government as they are forced to go back to Iraq through involuntary extension of their service, known as stop-loss policy. According to Peirce, out of 650,000 troops that were sent both to Iraq and Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11, more than 81,000 had been stop-lossed. In 2009, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates promised to eliminate the practice of forcing soldiers to return to war within the next two years, a policy formed in response to many protests that opposed the government's "backdoor draft" (Shanker 2009).

*Stop-Loss* is an attempt to interpret the national experience of war using shell shock, Vietnam War, and Western formulas. As Burgess et al. noted, until 2009 more than one third of soldiers came back from Afghanistan and Iraq traumatized (comparably, "only" 15% of Vietnam veterans had full-blown trauma, and 11% had partial PTSD [Scurfield: 2]) (60). Although Peirce uses earlier mythic structures to portray this trauma, she employs new cinematic language and postmodern influence to voice how different is this new generation of soldiers, and how disappointed they are

with continuous government lies, which proves as the counter-argument to Wright's words that the government's lies do not mean much to the modern soldier. Just as Vietnam films were created in times when the war trauma was most painful to Americans, Peirce's film employs similar tactics to achieve traumatic effect, but one that would reach a new generation of American audiences. But *Stop-Loss* did not do well at the box office, the same fate shared by many other Iraq War films suggesting that the subject is still too recent to deal with, and the trauma is not ready to be overcome. As Robert Eberwein claimed, due to post-9/11 politics, and the saturation of the conflict, the moviegoers were uninterested in Iraq War films, and for Eberwein these films were often not war-related, but evoking new "untraditional" approach to the subject that many critics failed to acknowledge (2010: 4). Whatever the case in Eberwein's understanding of tradition of the war cinema, the "mythologized" and yet "real" Iraq War is still rejected by the audiences, who do not wish to see its cinematic representations

The Vietnam PTSD films lost much popularity over the past two decades as measured by the small number of these film productions since the 1990s, but the drama of a Vietnam veteran was far from forgotten. The traumatized veteran was often featured somewhere in the background (being the father of the main hero, the traumatized criminal, experienced and influential authority in the police force/town/army, etc.) or reappropriated for comedy (e.g. *The Big Lebowski* [1998]). Despite resigning from the major formula story that featured the Vietnam veteran, the character as such was still in development, but this time in a role of a background character. *Stop-Loss* uses both this progressed protagonist of the Vietnam stories' arch and a Western character. Peirce was ambitious to be the first, "ahead of the curve," in attempting to formulate an Iraq PTSD film. Affirmed by veterans that her film shows

an authentic experience of the soldiers who come back, Peirce had done thorough background research, interviewing many soldiers.

Departing, however, from *Stop-Loss* being on the border of Vietnam PTSD film and a Western, the peculiarity of its style brings it closer to other Iraq War films that also experiment with cinematic language. Collaboration between Peirce and MTV is seen in the very first scenes of the film, where in a video titled “The Men of Shadow 3 going the fuck home,” seemingly made by the soldiers themselves with the usage of digital cameras, they sing Toby Keith’s patriotic song “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue.” In fact, Peirce cuts her film with similarly edited war scenes couple of more times, suggesting close relation between the postmodern sense of identity/video fragmentation and creation of simulational memory. In the first case the song is a patriotic, country tune, but the war changes the atmosphere into frustration, fear and anger later on. The second song and the war video manufactured for it use a hip-hop song. The video is dedicated to the dead soldiers and attempts to express the feelings of terror in the warzone:

Cause we're alone in this county, a hundred forty thousand friends  
With some 20 odd million, who would see us all dead  
You could only imagine our struggle, the odds we against  
Where they are but all times playing, both sides of the fence  
Though they haven't got me yet, I still ain't home  
Until then, its only a matter of time till I'm gone (4th25 – “Matter of Time”)

The third song, referring similarly with *The Hurt Locker* to the atmosphere of pumping adrenaline, is by the metal band Drowning Pool. The viewers can hear the lyrics say “let the bodies hit the floor” and observe the aggression that men experience during the raids and combat scenes. The soldiers, shown in pictures, fighting scenes, in their Humvees, drones, celebrating and mourning, edited in the MTV-intensified continuity fashion, break the film’s narrative into parts, separating the homefront experience with the warzone one. These scenes, on the one hand, pitch *Stop-Loss* more to the MTV generation, and on the other, clearly set it apart from other PTSD films. Besides these

consumer characteristics that would seemingly make Peirce's film an action video-like film with a high caliber Hollywood cast, *Stop-Loss* remains a sensitive attempt to present a case of PTSD.

The main character of *Stop-Loss* is Brandon King (Ryan Phillippe), a war hero and a lonesome young man. Together with his Texas friends he joins the army and goes to war to execute "payback for 9/11" (also the main motive given for enlisting in *Redacted*, *Green Zone* and *The Messenger*). Featuring the Texas boys (also dressing them as stereotypical cowboys), emphasizing male bonding, showing a difficult and perhaps even repressed love of the hero for a "good woman,"<sup>4</sup> displaying the terror of confrontation with the savage others and even featuring a bar fight at a dancehall party, Peirce uses many narrative devices typical for a Western film suggesting a mélange of genres that makes Iraq War PTSD film a postmodern pastiche of Western. But even though the film plays on the Western conventions, *Stop-Loss* still shifts attention away from the American mythic tradition to the story of how traumatic and immediate the war is. In fact, the war hero turns out to be a coward, which transforms the Western formula into projection of the consciousness struggle that the Iraq War veterans undergo. This struggle debunks the reality of war and hints at its inefficiency. *The Deer Hunter* is somewhat similar in playing on the Western conventions and then using them to showcase how this mythical romantic structure of American hero changes after undergoing a trauma. The characters' trajectory in *The Deer Hunter* and *Stop-Loss* is similar, and yet there are alterations in how some of them perceive the post-combat (post-captivity for *TDH*) experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Peirce assumes complicated relationship between Steve and Michelle. Steve decides to stay in the army, suggesting that he would not become another "typical" Texas man, who would marry and have a regular job, which infuriates Michelle. Despite this "difficult" relationship, another one, between Brandon and Michelle is suggested, when the two depart together to Washington looking for a solution to the stop-loss policy. With many scenes that were cut out from Peirce's film, it is however not certain how "repressed" the relationship between Brandon and Michelle really is.

When Brandon, Steve (Channing Tatum) and Tommy (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) come back<sup>5</sup> to their hometown after the traumatic experiences of combat, they are greeted with festivities. The parade, much like in *Jarhead*, and perhaps even more like *Born* is prepared to welcome the heroes. The banners saying, “we love our soldiers” and “Brandon is our hero” make the soldiers happy to be back. When Brandon is forced to make a speech he stammers that he was just doing his job and trying to bring his men back safe, and then goes on about how much the smell of onions made him think about home. His unsuccessful speech is stopped by Steve who more in line with propaganda messages exhorts “We’re over there killing them in Iraq so we ain’t gotta kill them in Texas.” Steve’s words are met with a big ovation, proving that the communities do not comprehend the damage that soldier’s consciousness undergoes in the combat, and that they do not wish to hear the details about the war. The latter idea is especially emphasized in the dance scene, where the soldiers go to celebrate their release from the army. There, Steve voices his hatred towards Iraqis repeating that there should be no more “urban combat bullshit” and that the army should rather drop the 10k bombs on cities. And on the other hand he contradicts himself, sharing the one-shot ritualistic philosophy of Michael from *TDH*, which makes him want to become a sniper: “one shot. One kill. Let me be the faceless enemy.” Tommy is very hostile towards the Iraqis as well, proclaiming that the U.S. should kill whole “Haji” families and “take them back to the Bible times.” He seeks to unload his anger, so when a man comes and asks his wife to dance, he explodes and gets into a fight.

It is during this party that it becomes clear that all the men suffer from PTSD. Violence, hatred, paranoia and delusion surface as they drink. When Steve gets home

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<sup>5</sup> They come back also alongside Isaac (Rob Brown), but he does not play any important role. It might seem that he was thrown to the background to emphasize the racial diversity in the army.



he becomes delusional and wrecks the furniture and hits his girlfriend Michelle (Abbie Cornish). Michelle calls Brandon for help and they both watch how Steve, just in his underwear, digs a trench in the ground to sleep. Then Tommy joins them, drunkenly hitting the lamppost, and confides to Brandon that his wife threw him out. The veterans' partners do not comprehend their behaviors and instead of offering them any help, they force them to leave their households. In these introductory scenes showing that the men coming back are indeed in some ways traumatized, Brandon seems the only one who can help them. Apart from his inability to make a "good" propaganda speech during the parade, he appears to be most psychologically stable amongst his companions. It is, however, only an illusion. When Brandon goes to the military base to finish his duty, he promises Tommy the position of a new squad leader. However, he is surprised to learn that he is getting shipped back to Iraq. He goes to see his superior and shouts angrily to "fuck the president" as he is not "over there fighting" and seeing his buddies "burn alive in Humvees." When he learns that there is no way to release him from the "backdoor draft," he escapes from the military base and heads home to find another way of getting out. This, basically, makes him a deserter. He decides to head to Washington D.C. and ask the Senator, who greeted him warmly at the parade, for help. Michelle pities Brandon and makes the decision to drive him to the capitol. During their trip Brandon's own trauma surfaces. In one of the scenes at the motel he stares at the swimming pool and hallucinates that he sees his burned companion, Rico, in the bottom of it. He has combat flashbacks from which the viewers can learn that Brandon is not only haunted by the death of his men, but also by the Iraqi women and children that he killed with a grenade while trying to get Steve out of the ambush. When his belongings are stolen from the car Brandon goes out to find the thieves and gets into the fight with them. He becomes violent and aggressive, referring to the robbers as "Hajis" and

holding them at a gunpoint.

These are just a few examples of how Peirce depicts the effects of war trauma on veteran's psyche. Men come back broken; the past is constantly reexamined to find new possibilities of action. As Patricia Pisters argued, when a man is incapable of making necessary connections to the present active affects of life, he might commit suicide (2003: 71). The veterans become thus self-destructive, and their subjectivities, in terms of Bergson's image category, do not function correctly (Pisters: 72). Tommy shoots at his wedding gifts, giving value neither to the physical objects nor to his relationship; he feels disdain for domesticity in any form. Drunk driving, getting into fights and damaging the property proves that Tommy is in self-destruction progresses. Right until the point when he kills himself, nobody is able to help him. Even while arrested he only weeps that he wants to get back to the army, as it is the army that he finds to be his family now. Withdrawn from the society, then, Tommy cannot locate himself anywhere outside of the warzone. He feels guilty that his companions died, and not him. Confusion between the virtual and the real, as in case of the post-war depression, deepens when the veterans are rapidly reintegrated without any proper psychological care. Adding to that, what happens with this broken self-mechanism is related to what Deleuze and Guattari thought of the war machine. For them, the army was appropriated by the state, rather than just used by it. Consequently, they claimed that the soldier is becoming a part of this "machinic enslavement," which ultimately can break him through the transformation into this "slave."

There is both a deterritorialization and a becoming proper to the war machine; the special body, in particular the slave-infidel-foreigner, is the one who *becomes* a soldier and believer while remaining deterritorialized in relation to the lineages and the State. You have to be born an infidel to become a believer; you have to be born a slave to become a soldier. (2010: 33)

The enslavement does not work in same way with all men, and just as Tommy and Steve wish to stay as part of military's machine, Brandon seeks ways to escape

from it. While Tommy sees army as his family now, and Steve proclaims “death before dishonor” in his corporeal confession, Brandon proves never to have successfully *become* a soldier. And while he becomes a sort of Western renegade by denouncing the law, he is still an antithesis of American hero in that he flees from obligation and considers becoming a fugitive from his homeland. Steve, on the other hand, tries to exonerate Brandon by enlisting to become a sniper. Like Michael in *TDH*, Steve becomes a backbone for his friends, and does not abandon them when they need help. And similarly to Michael, Steve fails in his attempts to save Tommy from self-destruction by resigning from his personal happiness for the sake of the community. Putting honor above all else, Steve does not comprehend Brandon’s distress for trying to escape his duty. In the end, Brandon decides to honor his duty as well, and his integrity makes him join the army again, getting back to the “machinic enslavement.”

Peirce’s film is political in that she makes the comments not only about the dishonest stop loss procedure, but also about the way in which a generation of young men is wasting their lives fighting a war for which they are unprepared. Showing a Mexican immigrant, who managed to survive an RPG attack on a Humvee, but ending up blind and with amputated limbs, she remarks on veterans’ damaged lives. Rico absolves Brandon, telling him that he saved him in Iraq, and yet adding how other wounded veterans make the infirmary sound like a horror movie. Rico also says to Brandon that he should not get back to the warzone, but that he himself might, because if he got killed then his family would get green cards. He affirms at the same time that there is no gain in this war—no patriotic purpose, just a benefit for the immigrants, who want to establish stronger position in the community. Similarly, in *Born*, Kovic is in the hospital where he is maltreated, yet at the same time the black workers (nurses) there tell him that he is fighting for the freedom of the Vietnamese, while minorities’

rights in the U.S. need improvements first. While the film has many anti-war statements, its ending—Brandon's return to army—is not treated as sad and inescapable, but rather as acceptance of loss and trauma. Similarly the end of *TDH*—the gathering of community and singing “God Bless America” brings to mind that despite the trauma and death, the values of patriotism and simple love towards the homeland are more important if the chaos is ever to be overcome. Eventually also Brandon can recuperate and go back to the warzone. Despite then commenting on how the government abuses the soldiers and forces them to fight against their will, Peirce ends her film with an embracing patriotic responsibilities' suggestion of going back to the army rather than enforcing the anti-establishment message. After all, in the last scene of the film, when Brandon and Steve are in the bus taking them back to the war, the viewers can see them smile.

*Stop-Loss* is showing the Iraq War as an unwarranted nightmare, which the America has not awakened yet from. In Brandon's words, which reverberate this feeling of being deceived, the viewers can hear many criticisms of the war that have been mentioned throughout the years:

I signed up thinking I go over there to protect my country, my family. We wanted payback for 9/11. And you get there and you realize the war wasn't even about any of that. The enemy ain't out in the desert. They're in the hallways and rooftops, living rooms, kitchens. Everybody's got a weapon. Everybody. Nobody knows who's who. The only thing you can believe in is surviving. Protecting the guy to your left and the guy to your right. Side by side, willing to die for each other. By the time you start seeing good friends' bodies held together by a belt after a car bomb you get a kill or be killed mentality.

The shattered psyches of the soldiers, and the feeling of being used by their country, break the protagonists' narrative in *Stop-Loss* from the national archetype of a Western hero. Using the formulas already appropriated by the Vietnam films, especially in *TDH* and *Born*, Peirce is attempting to make the Iraq experience assimilated. By employing the mélange of narratives from Western and Vietnam PTSD film, *Stop-Loss* is making the war open to re-experiencing and interpretation. Being a coproduction with MTV,

the film is also suggesting to bear the greatest significance on the new “generation kill.” The mythic structures are thus broken in an attempt to understand the inchoate experience of the Iraq War trauma.

Employing more intimate and nuanced approach to the subject of Iraq War PTSD is Oren Moverman’s *The Messenger* (2009). Like most of the films discussed in this work, *The Messenger* destabilizes generic expectations, but unlike all previous films, it does not do so through employment of new cinematic tools. Although it is a PTSD film focused on a soldier, it has more to do with a repentant victim and the traumatized families of dead soldiers. Apart from that, Moverman intensifies his drama by adding romance, which shows the extension of the suffering and its effects on the human relations. Unlike in *Stop-Loss*, Moverman does not use Western film conventions, and yet his characters could be seen somewhat in line with their heroes, who favor their solitude and code of honor above all else. The director also moves away from the postmodern influence that is seen in the majority of the Iraq films—here the main protagonist does not even own a computer, and in order to communicate, the characters use outmoded pagers. *The Messenger* thus assumes a different form of a PTSD film: one that does not show the viewers precisely what happened to the character before and during the war, but implements this information in details throughout the film—in mise-en-scène, dramatic acting and nuanced dialogues.

Like many other war films, *The Messenger* focuses on an individualized tragedy of a soldier, and in this particular case, on the tragedy of Staff Sergeant Will Montgomery (Ben Foster). The story follows Will’s point of view and it starts with him coming back from the hospital, where he ended up after a combat action that left many of his men injured. After getting out he meets with his ex-girlfriend, now in another relationship, but still up for sleeping with Will. During his meeting with Kelly, Will

reveals that he has no future plans. Having still three months to serve, colonel Dorsett assigns Will to the Casualty Notification Team perceiving Will as a man of “solid stature” and a model hero. From now on, Will alongside Captain Tony Stone (Woody Harrelson) would deliver the casualty information to the dead soldiers’ next of kin.

The narrative structure in Moverman’s film sheds light on the war heroics, military values and the traumatized psyche, just as the Vietnam PTSD films discussed above. However, unlike the characters in these Vietnam films, Will and Stone’s experiences do not affect them in destructive ways. *The Messenger* has also many common points with *Stop-Loss*, and films of the Homefront category, notably with *Taking Chance* (2009) and *Grace Is Gone* (2007). Despite, however, focusing on many elements that are present in the homefront films (family trauma, loss of national heroes), Moverman’s film is still primarily concentrated on the personal suffering of the soldier. This soldier, like Ron Kovic in *Born* feels guilty for surviving, and tries to repent for it through his new duty. Moverman includes no flashbacks, backstories, or even soldiers’ videos to reenact their combat trauma. Instead, the linear narrative illustrates that, despite internal trauma, life still continues at its steady pace.

Despite this steady pacing, this male melodrama has many points in common with a war film. And as a male melodrama, a genre that focuses on the relationship between an aging father character (in this case Stone) and an inadequate son (Will), *Stop-Loss* emphasizes the existence of soldiers as the ‘male weepies’ [as Thomas Schatz characterized such heroes (1981: 239)], but reverses the situation, setting the son in the role of a future patriarch. And just like in combat films, Moverman depicts male bonding and a ritualistic attitude towards the army’s rules. This bonding, which happens at the homefront rather than the warzone, starts from a difficult relationship between men. Will, Stone’s new partner, does not understand how he could get demoted

to the Casualty Notification team as a decorated war hero with barely 3 months left to serve. Despite that, he never complains—or, rather, he barely talks, implying that what he went through was “unspeakable,” suggesting similarity with Swofford’s words about his father’s war experiences. Will’s timid behavior and Stone’s garrulous personality do not mesh well in the beginning—traumatized Will treats his job seriously, but does not wish to develop a ‘bromance’ with Stone. This changes throughout their work together: first, they unload the tension in a non-violent argument, then, instead of dealing with their issues they decide to go fishing, where they get drunk and fistfight with other men. Finally they end up confessing their problems to one another, and Will voices his trauma, which makes Stone cry. Over this process, the viewers learn more about the heartbreaking trauma of combat than from *Born on the Fourth of July*, in which the combat sequences are still largely un-mythologized. In a way, both *Born* and *The Messenger* are a critique of Hollywood combat, which makes the action always seem more inflated and pompous than it actually is from the perspective of a single soldier.

Moverman’s film eschews many conventions of the war film, notably the portrayal of combat and adduced tension between the soldier and the enemy. Eliminating these two features, the director allowed for further developing other conventions, in particular, the psychological portrayal of a soldier. Both Stone and Will are Western-like models of masculinity in the sense that they abide by the ‘male’ code and attempt to reaffirm their machismo in the society. Moverman is modernizing this Western model with his characters, but still uses much of heroes’ features from a Western melodrama. While Stone’s character is more forcefully macho, since he did not experience combat on the same level with Will, they both fulfill many stereotypes coherent with the Western masculinity model. Ideally, Western heroes were always the

epitome of masculinity and patriotism, emulating in the viewers the need to perform in line with the prevalent norms and expectations. While, in the Western, these masculine bodies are usually seen in action, in Moverman's film, both Stone and Montgomery are static, and yet their trauma, which cannot be voiced (Western heroes are often seen as silent types), makes them charismatic and stereotypically masculine. Apart from their visibly muscular bodies (often associated with manliness), they have many behavioral features typical for a Western hero: they drink (even Stone, a recovering alcoholic, 'takes a break' from his 3-year long abstinence), they are aggressive, they refuse to speak about their feelings (until the cathartic confession), they personify their cars as though they were horses (Stone refers to his car as "silver bullet"), they talk about women and engage in "masculine activities" like fishing or playing "war." Apart from that, there is of course Montgomery's love for a good woman. Similarly to Michael in *TDH*, Will becomes interested in a patient, virtuous and sensitive widow Olivia (Samantha Morton), and similarly to Michael, he is unable to consummate this new relationship. Unlike Michael, however, this time the protagonist's incapability comes on the woman's side. Moverman then, similarly to Peirce, shows his protagonists in line with the Western assumptions of masculinity, proving once again that soldiers have much in common with the cowboys. Perhaps in Peirce's case, this usage of Western and playing on its conventions is more visible, and yet somehow more chaotic, while Moverman is more consistent in execution of these Western melodrama heroes in his world, proving that his film is developing the psychological portraits of soldiers in a more nuanced and focused way rather untypical for a PTSD film.

The soldier in Moverman's vision is thus both a Western-like hero and a repentant war character like Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July*. The trauma of the main character is contrasted with the unfulfilled dreams of combat from the allegedly



traumatized Gulf War veteran. Will's PTSD, buried in his subtle mimics, unspeakable experiences, and even in the careful choice of mise-en-scene (his house is empty, and grey, the only décor element is the clock that reminds of Will's insomnia; when Will strolls alone in the streets he passes remnants of the consumer world, seeing for example an advertisement of a comic book store where Superman on the background of American flag stares back at him smiling as a "hero" rather than being traumatized like Will), flourishes throughout the film until the viewers, along with Stone, can hear a full confession. Starting from the scene at the hospital, where Montgomery carefully applies eye-drops to treat his polytrauma after the bombing, the viewers observe the extent of Will's damage. By breaking off with his girlfriend Kelly, he wanted to spare her the pain of learning about his death. This indicates that Will gave up on his civilian life before even being sent to Iraq. Anticipating his own death, he withdrew from society, rejecting his "previous" life. After coming back to society's order, Will attempts to get back with Kelly, but learns that she has found someone else. Having no other familiar points at home that could assemble his fragmented self apart from Kelly, Will isolates himself. He listens to metal music like James in *The Hurt Locker*, and watches violent movies (the off-camera voice in TV shouts "why don't you just kill me" echoing Will's inner dilemma). Emotionally distant, yet very dutiful, Montgomery takes interest in a widowed woman whom he had notified of her husband's death in Iraq. This is against the morality of the society, which Olivia, the widow, acknowledges telling him that people would simply see him as a "lowlife trying to take advantage of [her] grief" and her as a "slut" who is not really grieving. They both, however, recently suffered loss—he lost his comrades in combat, and she lost her husband—and this brings them closer together. Olivia admits that she lost her husband long before his death, associating his enlistment with withdrawal from civilian life. Olivia's

experiences as the soldier's wife function in a way as the other side of sergeant James' story in *The Hurt Locker*. There, the viewers see James, who is incapable of coming back to his family, and who continues to join new military's objectives. Similarly, Olivia's husband was reenlisting repeatedly, as if "staying at home was no longer an option." The war changed him to the level that Olivia mentioned that even his shirts were permeated with the smell of his rage and the man he had become in Iraq. Will has this rage too. Instead of getting violent and destructive, however, he goes on for long walks, listens to heavy metal, trains soldiers before deployment, and fulfills his duties with the Casualty Notification team. His repentance manifests itself in this respectful and obedient approach to his duties. In one of the scenes he shouts at the newbie soldier fixing a car to pay attention to detail since in the Iraqi heat every second that he stays on the road increases his chances of getting shot. Montgomery's frenzy in the moment belies something more than just his dedicated approach to duties. By shouting at the private he actually wishes to prevent another soldier's death.

Will's repentance is related to his survivor's guilt, and not being able to save his man. In his intimate conversation with Stone, Will confesses that he does not feel like a hero since he was the one to put his comrade in the position where he could get killed. "I loaded him into the bomb. That's not a hero in my book," Will's admission and suffering are intensified also by the fact that the body of another soldier blasted into pieces onto his face. This led Montgomery to lose sight for some time, and even when he got it back he was unable to see colors, rendering everything grey (rather than the opposite of seeing things in black and white). On the roof of the hospital Will contemplated suicide, but with the sun rising he suddenly "didn't feel like dying anymore," bringing him back to the society in a metaphoric way with the rebirth of the day.

The PTSD story of Will, similarly to the story of Ron Kovic, ends then on a good note, but disregards the role of women in the process. In *Born* Ron is converting back to life with finding a new purpose, and that is to protest against the war and help other veterans. Although Oliver Stone's film acknowledges a woman (who does not occur in Kovic's autobiographical book), she is ultimately unnecessary for Kovic to turn into anti-war pacifist rendering the plot in line with more patriarchal mechanisms. Kovic's filmic girlfriend, then, is an example of a cold-hearted feminist activist, who does not care for his disability or political views. In the end, it is Kovic's mother's prophesy that he would be a great man one day that masculinizes him again. Similar re-masculinization is not necessary for Will, who establishes his manliness in the very first scenes by seducing his ex-girlfriend. It is, however, again the woman portrayed as betrayer: Kelly not only rejected Will when he went to war, but she is also cheating on her current fiancé by sleeping with him. On the other side is Olivia, who unlike Kelly is not as eager to be unfaithful to her partner, even though he has died. Although she unintentionally seduces Will, she does not succumb to her physical needs and does not consummate their union. Apart from the triangle Kelly-Olivia-Will, the women are objectified and villainized in other scenes as well. Stone, like a modern-day Casanova, is shown having no trouble attracting and then forgetting the women he sleeps with. Unlike Montgomery, Stone disregards women: he shows no interest in their feelings and speaks of them chauvinistically with Will:

Vietnam, those guys got laid six ways from Sunday. Bosnia – best brothels in the world! Desert Storm – we had R and R ships with Filipino hookers... on call. Yeah, but this war? I don't know. All the religious bullshit, the Crusades and jihad and nobody getting laid. I mean that right there is half the reason everybody's so angry, yeah?

Not only is the military shown here again as the area of masculinity, but it is also shown as a misogynist sphere of work. The war is associated with sex, equating masculine power with sexual control. The characters in Moverman's film do not contest this view

of women as villains: there is no visible enemy here apart from threatening femininity that needs to be suppressed. The only female character who might redeem femininity is Olivia, but she suppresses her needs and feelings to prove that women can still be faithful and moral. Even during her husband's funeral, when the salutary shots are fired, she blinks similarly to the veterans in the parades of *Born*, suggesting that her trauma is a subtle way of rebuffing violence rather than a deep comprehension of how the soldiers feel during the war.

And the soldiers who experienced seeing someone die in front of their eyes often refuse to acknowledge any psychological stain in the name of "masculinity." In *The Messenger*, Montgomery listens to a veteran tell a war story: it starts off as a funny story about a "Haji-Wan-Kenobi," a young Iraqi man who does not look his age but seems much older. Suddenly, the veteran changes his tone, pointing to his body and saying, "he got one here, a couple here, one went through his chest. You could almost hear the lungs deflate." What started off as a gathering of friends and sharing laughs turns into a morose silence. Montgomery takes the man out to smoke a cigarette and says "it's like coming back from another planet," attempting to show understanding, but the storyteller acts as if he did not comprehend why Montgomery could even be worried about him. Like many veterans, he refuses to admit that there is a problem. Even when the man's girlfriend comes after him, he only asks why she looks at him the way she does. Apart from this scene, and from what the viewers learned about Olivia's husband, there are no other traumatized soldiers. Montgomery's behavior, however, along with the fact that Olivia's husband continuously reenlisted and the veteran's end to the story suggest that despite the trauma these men have gone through none of them wishes to acknowledge it. They suffer silently, like Olivia, who only once voices her anger with the military, when she shouts at the recruiting soldiers to leave alone a group

of young men since they are “just kids.”

Another thing that is clashed similarly to the dynamic femininity-masculinity is the Gulf War – Iraq War dispute. Stone is trying to make himself look like a “real” veteran and says that he was shot at during the war. In another scene he makes a speech about how civilian life is for people who did not experience the war, and how neither he nor Will can un-see it. Everything Stone says, however, turns out to be a lie made up in some twisted attempt to make him look more “masculine.” Will calls Stone out on this when they argue about how to treat the notified families—Stone pushes for a more distanced approach:

I know I’m in the army. I gave blood to the army. I got blown up in a firefight that lasted longer than your entire war. I didn’t sunbathe in Kuwait with the rest of the POGs. I fought!

Stone, like Troy in *Jarhead*, thirsts for action and killing. His actual experiences related to the Gulf War are similar. Just as Troy and Swofford are unable to even give the one shot they yearn for so much, Stone’s feelings about the futility of his role as a soldier are amplified when he cannot get a “taste” of war. “All I ever wanted was to get shot at. That too much to ask for on the battlefield? A battle?” asks Stone, debunking his real involvement in the war. With all his machismo, roughness and misogynistic comments, even he gives in to a softer side of himself when he listens to Will’s story and finally weeps. Crying, he finally acknowledges his feelings and stops acting like a cowboy hero from the Westerns.

Iraq War PTSD films use both formula of a Western hero and a Vietnam veteran, but often invert them, showing a new generation of soldiers and their naïveté about war and violence. While the Vietnam films, notably *Born on the Fourth of July*, showed soldiers largely influenced by Westerns and deceived by Hollywood’s portrayal of war and combat, this new generation of soldiers in Iraq were mainly deceived by the government, which forced them to go to war without fully justifiable

motives. Just as most of the Iraq films do not comment on these motives, so the PTSD films fail to develop any particular ideological standpoint towards the war. Despite showing that these soldiers go to war unaware of its reality and then come back disillusioned about the role of the soldier, the PTSD films still portray this disillusionment in a way in which a Western hero would have dealt with them, and then appropriating this Western hero to the postmodern conditions of the new generation ultimately serving as a *mélange* of a war genre and a postmodern pastiche of the mythologized American genre of a Western. These soldiers are broken machos, whose bodies still carry the physical power, but the mind does not allow them to function properly. What Iraq PTSD films also take from the Western is the stereotypical portrayal of women – although they do not understand the traumatized veteran, and suffer themselves the spiritual loss of a partner and breaking of the family, they make attempts to reconnect with their loved ones. Like the Vietnam PTSD films, Iraq films delegate the traumas in similar manner: into a repentant victim, refighting soldier, and a disordered traumatized veteran. Unlike Vietnam films, however, Iraq PTSD films do not mythologize the war in the similar manner, proving rather that their presence there was not only futile, but also unnecessary.

Genre-wise, Iraq PTSD films have then similar features with earlier wars' PTSD films. And while Peirce uses the techniques and styles of MTV, Moverman's film is more classical and lyrical. Even though both narratives and main characters are similar, stylistically these films have many differences. But the main message of disillusionment prevails, showing in both instances the society's lack of compassion towards veterans and the disordering effects of war on the human psyche.

## CHAPTER 6

### HOMEFRONT: WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

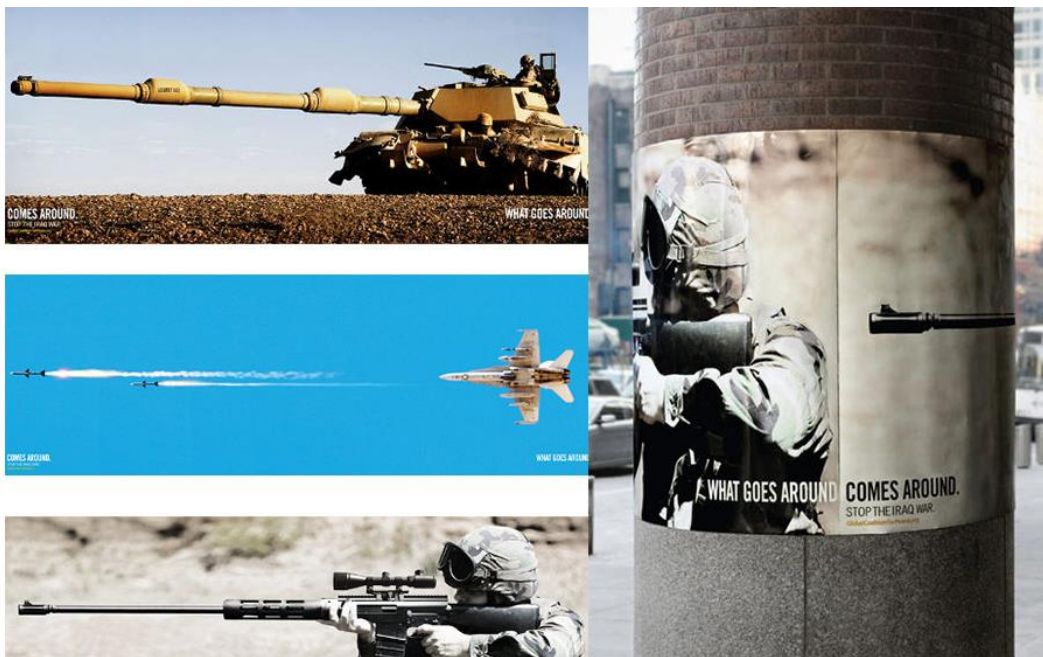


Figure 1: Big Ant International poster "What Goes Around Comes Around. Stop the Iraq War."

War necessitates damage, and this damage is rarely just battlefield-centered. The war and death take their toll, traumatizing those who witness death on the front, but also those left at home. And while it is a fact that soldiers die in the warzone, despite the Iraq Wars to be acclaimed bloodless, the acceptance of this fact is difficult for the families and nation back at home even if the media retell many traumatic stories of

soldiers. The portrayal of this karmic destiny of warriors was displayed in the Big Ant International posters that used columns to emphasize the two-sidedness of war, and how its existence causes constant cycle of retribution. It is, however, also significant in terms of homefront peace fighters—the national trauma<sup>1</sup> and realization of immoral nature of war, causes for the homeland to comprehend this war in negative terms. Those who wage war (whether behind or against its justifications) are bound to experience negative effects in proportion to those they themselves inflict on the “enemy.” What goes around comes around.

### **6.1 Propaganda, protests and managing the war at home in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

Everything that happens in the homeland during the times of war that relates to the action and policies of war can be considered part of the homefront experience. According to Catherine Lutz, U.S. citizens both from inside and outside the military often fail to acknowledge this experience due to the government’s propaganda and concomitant secrecy laws that obscure the history and contemporary reality of war (2001: 2). Despite, however, this claim of invisibility of war at the homefront, the homeland experience is often revealed in films and on television. While U.S. citizens often disregard thoughts of the costs of war (“melted, exploded, raped, and lacerated bodies and destroyed social worlds”), and focus instead on the war’s purpose (“freedom assured,” “aggressors deterred”) (Lutz, 2001: 2), the fact remains that war does not happen only on the battlefield. And although many WW2 films that decided to focus on the homefront experience were made in line with the national propaganda, the

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<sup>1</sup> An in-depth discussion of trauma is beyond the scope of this study. For a more detailed analysis on national trauma see Arthur G. Neal. 2005. *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc.



cinema has shifted away from such an approach ever since. The majority of the Vietnam films, contrarily to the Hollywood's ideological outlook during WW2, showed people's disdain for war, and its negative effects on the lives of soldiers' families.

It has to be then acknowledged that Hollywood's attitude towards war cinema changes with time, reflecting not only on the ideological implications of the filmmakers, but also on the political moods of the era. As Mark Jonathan Harris et al. noted, WW2 "was the last of the good wars," arguing that it was the only one in the 20th century to be tremendously supported by the American people (1984: 81). And just as the nation supported the troops and their contribution to the war's outcome during the WW2, the filmmakers often acknowledged and sustained this encouragement by adding propaganda messages to their films.

While the main motive for Americans to join the war was the attack on Pearl Harbor—which came without warning nor attempts at negotiations to maintain peace—the notion of WW2 as a threat to the nation became truly widespread in this attack's aftermath. The Pearl Harbor attack is thus a significant moment in U.S. history, and similarly to the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, these attacks have lasting presence in the national memory. The urge for retribution provided the reasons to fight, and encouraged the American philosophy to assure "freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion; freedom from want; and freedom from fear," which became the main principle of what can be understood as the major U.S. ideological framework (Harris: 83).

The WW2 homefront films function then in this orbit of evoking greater patriotic feelings and showcasing that love for the country, especially in the times of war, should be more important to Americans than one's own comforts. While the U.S. joined the war relatively late, and the WW2 film genre truly proliferated only at the

very end of the 1940s, homefront films that were made during the war (1943-1945) were mainly propaganda showing why the U.S. should care about the situation in Europe and how it could lead to spreading “evil.” Similarly, during the period post-Pearl Harbor and post-9/11, the U.S. government warned the people that Hitler/Saddam Hussein might soon develop/developed the WMDs; in case of the WW2, the race for the nuclear weapon was the most fearful at the time, and the fear that Saddam has already gotten hold of WMDs became more threatening after revealing his associations with Osama bin Laden. And while propaganda films were quite popular during the war years, Hollywood<sup>2</sup> was not as eager to make films acknowledging that America was at war. Homefront films were thus rarely made among the more favored genres of musicals and Westerns. Apart from the combat and spy films that portrayed the war in various ways (from documentaries, fictional combat accounts to totally fictitious spy/journalist stories as shown in Hitchcock’s *Foreign Correspondent*) not many films reflected on how the war affected the lives of Americans.

The daily lives of the U.S. citizens were distorted, nonetheless. Apart from the food, gasoline and clothing rationings, there was not enough housing due to heavy migration to the cities. Since the migration could not be helped—men had to report to the military bases often located near big cities, and it was difficult to commute due to gasoline shortages—many Americans found it their patriotic obligation to provide rooms for lodgers, often military personnel. One instance of this is depicted for example in George Stevens’ romantic comedy *The More the Merrier* (1943), where a young woman, Connie Milligan (Jean Arthur) decides to rent a room in her flat in Washington, D.C. She motivates her decision by wanting to prove that she is a patriot, and since

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<sup>2</sup> Since the WW2 was happening prior to the television era, people could only choose to watch what was offered in cinemas, and during 1940s many documentaries about the WW2 were made by the government, and urged by president Roosevelt to be released in theaters.

these are the war times, everyone should do their part in helping out. While the film does not talk much about war, only mildly calling Hitler a liar, the events that happen throughout it are a result of this “good war.” The war’s effects are shown with people packed into their homes, growing closer together, not living through a horrible experience, but as one that could produce a few laughs.

Similarly to Stevens’ film, Selznick’s production *Since You Went Away* (1944) comments on the housing problem, food shortages, and life at the homefront. And while *The More the Merrier* is more of a romantic comedy a true homefront film, Selznick’s approach is more nuanced and expands on the issue of what happens to the soldiers’ families more deeply. Even more so, *Since You Went Away* describes a two-year family saga during which a soldier’s wife and children grow up, fall in love, celebrate holidays, mourn losses and rediscover their purpose in postwar America. The main character is Mrs. Anne Hilton (Claudette Colbert), a mother of two, and her daughters, Jane (Jennifer Jones) and Bridget (Shirley Temple). Since Anne’s husband left for war, all three strive to manage their lives on their own. Colbert plays here a stereotypical American housewife from the middle class. With her daughters, she lives in a big house, presumably somewhere in the suburbs. Despite having a suitor, Anne patiently waits for her husband to come back. The whole family is presented as ideal, and suffering through war in a most honorable way. Like Connie in *The More the Merrier*, Hiltons take in a lodger, but whereas Connie’s motivation is expressed mainly as patriotic, Anne is motivated by money (to continue living on a relatively similar level as before the war). The lodger is a grumpy old soldier, and while he seems rough and sullen, the “perfect” household of Mrs. Hilton also affects him, turning him into a grandfather figure. The older daughter, Jane, is first shown as in love with her mother’s suitor, but then she falls for their lodger’s grandson. Meanwhile, other effects of war are shown

on the family's life: the lodger becomes a new addition to the family, they suffer financially, they do not have enough food, and their social position lowers due to their difficult financial situation.

The second part of the film (as considered by the moment of intermission's end) more vividly portrays the effects of war on the whole nation. While the first one is more introductory and family-centered, the second segment portrays a heartbroken and traumatized Jane, who just lost her fiancé in the war, now struggling to work as a nurse's aide in the hospital for veterans. While she swears to "bring comfort to the ailing and the wounded of whatever color, race or creed" it needs to be noted that the U.S. during the WW2 maintained gender and race segregations, with the greatest power still belonging to white patriarchs. Selznick's film does not challenge these ideological notions of white supremacy. Here, the presence of the black servant and black soldiers is used in a tone of propaganda rather than for the sake of proving that blacks served in the army side by side with the white soldiers. Hollywood, by acknowledging the minorities, was giving a strong and clear message that everyone was in this war together, fighting a common cause. WW2 films, then, especially while considering classical Hollywood cinema, were largely ideological, especially when it came to such issues as war and national identity.

In addition to Jane's job at the hospital, her mother decides to fulfill her patriotic duties by getting a job as a welder, showing how women took over the "masculine" jobs since the men had gone to war. At work she meets a woman with a name "they never heard at the country club": Zofia Koslowska (Alla Nazimova). The woman tells Mrs. Hilton that she always prayed with her little Janka that one day they would get to go the "fairylend across the sea," but Zofia was the only who managed to get through. Idealizing American principles she says:

(...) I went all by myself to the Statue of Liberty and read what it says there for the world to see. Do you know it? (...) I'll never forget it. I know it so well here because I feel it so much here [pointing her heart]. It says... "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door." And you've helped light that lamp for me, Anne Hilton. (...) You are what I thought America was.

Beyond this idealistic portrayal of the country and its liberal values, the film also carries a patriotic propaganda message to help all these coming from Europe during the war, as Mrs. Hilton by did being kind, and make them feel as welcome as Zofia Koslowska did.

In this nearly three-hour film, Selznick commented on the shortages, housing, dying soldiers, equality in America, patriotic duties, and liberal values. *Since You Went Away* is not the only WW2 homefront film, but it is the epitome of what can be understood by this term.

If WW2 was a "good war," supported by the people, the Vietnam War never got the same appraisal. Americans at home felt increasing disillusionment and disdain in course of the war, which was also reflected by the soldiers' attitude (Lutz: 138). Men tried to avoid getting drafted by gay posturing, escaping to Canada and other means (Lutz: 139). The army was facing many problems, notably the lack of democratic process (restricted rights of free speech, arbitrary military justice procedure, etc.) and race hatred. This last issue was particularly reflected in the economic situation of many minority groups in the country and resulted in growing animosity towards the government.

Apart from the angry nation and the disillusioned army, the Vietnam War took its toll also on families. The deaths of American soldiers left many families in mourning, but even contact with a traumatized father, a soldier just back from a front where he was forced to shoot at children, meant that home life was never the same. After experiencing such losses, the meaning of more important common good lost its value

to many. Especially since this “common good” was seen as highly dubious in case of the Vietnam War, the national trauma seemed to be incurable.

While the Vietnam War was often portrayed as a traumatic and unnecessary event, much of it was caused by the media. As the journalist films mention in the context of the correspondent’s work at the front, much of the coverage undermined support for the war. This caused for growing tensions at the homefront, amplified by the president’s focus on returning veterans and their experiences. Nixon was the first to concentrate rhetoric on the soldiers (their efforts should not be wasted) rather than on the history of Southeast Asia or America during the time of war (Lutz: 132), a shift that ultimately did not satisfy the citizens. The war was widely considered as “unpopular” and the media continued to heat the atmosphere by questioning all military decisions. In response, the army attempted to control the media, which only ended up eroding social trust (Lutz: 163).

One of the things that Hollywood films gathered from the ideological standpoint of the government was the focus on the soldier. The tales of soldiers’ personal experiences are still predominant in Vietnam War films. The homefront films, then, are in the same axis with the PTSD Vietnam films. The veteran soldier, alongside his family on the homefront, figures as the main character, but he unveils much more than just a story of post-war trauma. PTSD, which assumes in its definition trauma already after the fact, implicates the setting at home. And as shown in these films, most PTSD cases do not happen post-war, but during it. The WW2 homefront films differ in this aspect, as many soldiers who went to war did not return to the country before the end of the war. The war in Vietnam, however, went on for much longer and many soldiers that served during the first rotations came back sooner either due to their expired enlistment period or else due to war-related injuries. Thus, linking the focus on the veteran with

the homefront, it is understandable that there was no clear need for the homefront films during the Vietnam War as the PTSD films encapsulated the national mood towards the war.

This mood is reflected in the majority of the PTSD films, notably *The Deer Hunter* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, both of which are rather pessimistic about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *TDH* showed how war breaks communities into smaller, family units. With her fiancé being MIA, Linda could not find herself another proper suitor, and lived alone in Nick and Michael's trailer. Angela, Steve's wife, spent her days taking care of their child with the help of Steve's mother. Hinted earlier was that Steve's mother was against their wedding; she had complained to the priest that she would be left alone with Steve's pregnant wife after his departure to Vietnam. Presumably then, Angela is the victim of the community's values, and with Steve's return to the veteran's hospital rather than home she feels even more abandoned. Even though Michael and Steve eventually come back, the community is still broken, and to a large extent irrecoverably, suggesting national trauma. The only solution for *TDH* characters to remedy their damaged group is by accepting loss and mourning together.

*Born on the Fourth of July* takes a more political stand on national trauma and dealing with the war. While the main character Kovic struggles to recover from PTSD, he encounters a public that shows hostility both to his experiences and the war in general. Surrounded by an antagonistic society, Kovic does not comprehend the hatred towards the war. Forced to participate in the protests and spending more time with other veterans, he realizes that his own war experiences could not be considered in terms of a successful campaign. The homefront is thus portrayed in line with the media's influence. People hate the war, do not comprehend its justification, and think of the

troops being sent as people who voluntarily chose this fate. Apart from that, there is clear emphasis on the situation of blacks – while they do not hold freedoms themselves, Americans are fighting for the freedoms and liberties of a nation thousands of miles away. Contrarily, then, to the Hollywood idealization and patriotism at the homefront during the WW2, most of the Vietnam films set it as their goal to debunk the war's reality and the government's disillusioned treatment within the army. And with that in mind, it is more noticeable that the war film genre undertook big steps in demystifying the impression of war as an adventurous and heroic enterprise.

1990s Hollywood films still tend to romanticize and idealize the homefront experience during wartime, but these films do not show conflicts dated post-WW2. The USA joined the WWI in its last year, not fully aware of the war's reality in Europe. Despite the diminished access to information at the time, and sudden preparations to enter the war, the homefront mobilized itself quickly. Since both WWI and WW2 tend to be romanticized and mythologized in the U.S. history, especially in recent years when the Vietnam War took its toll on perception of the war involvement, the filmmakers turn to more nostalgic versions of the WWI and WW2 homefront experience. An example of that might Edward Zwick's *Legends of the Fall* (1994), a film that tells the story of three brothers during the WWI. It focuses mainly on the homefront where the recently married wife of the youngest brother learns of his death while waiting for him in his father's house, and his two remaining brothers then compete for her favors. In a Western-like romantic view of American wilderness the war is a framework for story of love, betrayal, and romantic heroism. Zwick made *Legends* 2 years before his Gulf War film *Courage Under Fire*, which also treats war as a romantic and heroic enterprise, yet one that can break the families and community apart. Another film that romanticized the homefront experience is Michael Bay's *Pearl*



*Harbor* (2001). The attack on Pearl Harbor, aimed at destroying the U.S. naval base in Hawaii, was the igniting event for America to join WW2. Bay's film, which aims to represent this attack, shows an idealized version of both Americans at the time and the patriotic mood in the country. While Pearl Harbor was, indeed, a turning point in the U.S. history, it was more traumatic than Bay's dreamy version. Both *Legends* and *Pearl Harbor* are a good example of what Takacs identifies in Hollywood productions that tout military technology and reduce the experience of war to a familiar one of "brotherhood" and self-sacrifice, producing a romanticized view of the military immediately before 9/11 (13). While Zwick and Bay endow the homefront experience with romantic notions of love, brotherhood and patriotism, they also mythologize American history in such a way as to bring hope of experiencing a "good war" for new generations.

## **6.2 The Gulf War and the Iraq War – echo of the "good war" or the relapse of the disdained war?**

In the 1990s Americans were more aware of their interests in the Middle East than they had been of their government's motives for going to Vietnam in the 1960s. As a result, more Americans supported the Gulf War, and the majority of citizens backed the troops despite the personal outlook on the war (McAlister: 237). The success of the Gulf War managed to redirect the narrative of the traumatic presence in Vietnam and change the perception of the army. The conservatives finally had evidence that the failure in Vietnam was caused by lack of proper force and military freedom of actions, and that the "Vietnam syndrome" could easily be overcome with substantiation of an alternative military experience (McAlister: 238).

The homefront experience of the Gulf War was thus characterized by support for the troops and saturation of the war in television news. People were “consuming” the war in a sense, and the war was brought from the public domain into private spaces. As McAlister notes, this “shared experience” of war at homes managed to achieve the purest imagined community in which the private self and the social identity intersected (241). The war was transported to the living room and even executed in advance with animations of planned strikes sparking debate on various strategies. As a result, “the more the media covered the operations, the more the U.S. public supported the war” (McAlister: 242).

This relatively tranquil decade of 1990s that promoted romanticized view of war finished with the attack on 9/11. A turning point in the contemporary era for the USA, the rupture of 9/11 brought back the trauma of Pearl Harbor, this time imagining the enemy as the “Axis of evil.” Saddam Hussein, often referred to just as Saddam (which calls for associations with Satan), became the main enemy of the USA. And while 9/11 was a terrible blow to the Americans and it might have been precipitated by the U.S. involvements in global affairs, it was considered as the chapter of U.S. history that reopened the possibly for another “Good War” (Lutz, 2002: 724).

The War on Terror, as proclaimed by president Bush, was not really a “good war,” dragging for a long time and losing people’s support. Meanwhile, the homefront was reminded the reasons to fight as the 9/11 event entered the national discourse and the popular culture. Multiple films dedicated to this subject (*United 93* [2006], *Inside the Twin Towers* [2006], *Reign Over Me* [2007], *Remember Me* [2010] and many others), along with the books (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* [2005], *Falling Man* [2007], and others), mentions in the television series about the event (*NCIS* [2003-], *Bones* [2005-], *24* [2001-], and many more) reiterated the traumatic event in

the national memory and helped sustain support for war, which as of this writing has lasted for more than 13 years.

Although the War on Terror was executed entirely on foreign soil, and despite its justification being 9/11 and warmongering rhetoric that the U.S. had a growing number of terrorists, the war slowly fatigued the nation at home. Considering its outcome, which instead of bringing peace and freedom has created even more terror in Iraq, in 2013 more than half of Americans thought that the war in Iraq was a mistake (MPO Research Group). The homefront did not suffer economically like during the World Wars, and it did not attract as many protesters as during the Vietnam War. Was it only this fatigue that affected life at the homefront? How did the war resonate in the lives of regular people?

The Iraq War homefront films differ much from the WW2 and Vietnam War films that tried to portray the experience of those at home. While WW2 homefront films were mainly focusing on propaganda of war and implementing patriotic messages, and the Vietnam films were showing the negative effects of war on soldier's psyche and in consequence breaking the communities, Iraq homefront films are hybrids, focusing on both national and family trauma. Their peculiarity lies in their dual refusal to comment on the war's justification and to portray the intimate experience of soldiers' trauma. Just as the Vietnam films focused more on a soldier's psyche at the homefront, the Iraq films concentrate entirely on the family of the soldier. The soldier thus became just the remnant of war and of a once-complete family. These films are more symbolic, aligning themselves with a general national trauma rather than individual stories of concrete characters.

### 6.3 The Death of a Soldier

*Life contracts and death is expected,  
As in a season of autumn.  
The soldier falls.*

*He does not become a three-days personage,  
Imposing his separation,  
Calling for pomp.*

*Death is absolute and without memorial,  
As in a season of autumn,  
When the wind stops,*

*When the wind stops and, over the heavens,  
The clouds go, nevertheless,  
In their direction.*

Wallace Stevens (1923)

This poem by Wallace Stevens speaks of a soldier's death in terms of its anonymity, depriving him of memorial and the chance for survivors to honor his death. He passes quickly, proving that the nature and life itself within it are merely fleeting moments, instantaneous and subjective collection of images. It is a brutal and yet acknowledged truth that soldiers die. As many reiterate, the purpose of the soldier is to kill and quite possibly be killed. But what of the family of the soldier? Of those who did not experience his fleeting moment of the death, how is their mourning impeded without the body?

This boundary between life and death is related to the demarcation between past and present. When the past becomes obscured and is no longer part of life, people often fear the change it might bring. One of the events that changes this boundary and increases the fear is the return of the dead body. While the U.S. soldiers fight on foreign soil, their returning bodies repeat the trauma of their death, a repeated trauma portrayed in Ross Katz's made-for-television movie *Taking Chance* (2009).

As Sarah Hagelin claimed, with the small number of combat deaths during the Gulf War the death of the soldier became a fascinating subject for the public (2012:

103). And while many war films of 1990s tried to satiate this desire to see the soldier's damaged body, it has not been fully explored in of the context of more recent wars. *Taking Chance* is reuniting this issue of the broken body and fascination with it, turning into a trauma story. There is thus no masculine vulnerability shown here, like for example in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), where combat is again revived to a commercial genre. Instead, Iraq War films like *Taking Chance* turn the masculine body into the object of public gaze where the death of a soldier becomes a national spectacle.

*Taking Chance* is based on Lt. Michael Strobl's essay about his own experience escorting the body of PFC Chance Phelps to his hometown in Wyoming. While the premise of the story shows valor, honor and respect, national war trauma surfaces as the main theme. The viewers do not know the past life of Chance and they do not know the circumstances of his death, which turns the notion of his sacrifice and the return of his body into the experience of nationhood and identity. Chance serves thus as an unrecognized soldier, one of many, which in the national trauma level of the story makes him an everyman. On another level, however, Strobl (Kevin Bacon) learns the scraps of Chance's story, which familiarizes him to viewers and emphasizes that all dead soldiers are in fact someone's child, friend, etc., intensifying the viewer's perception of their personal sacrifice.

The dead are the absentees of history, and the return of their bodies externalizes the notions of their experiences, resulting in feelings of unsettlement among those who encounter the dead. People who confront death often internalize it and confront their own mortality. However, as in Katz's film, and in cases of war deaths this confrontation also relates to national trauma and the notion of common identity. While escorting Chance's body, Strobl comes across many people affected by the private's death. One young man, who tells Strobl that he does not comprehend what the U.S. army is doing

in Iraq, asks him to tell the family that “they [the Americans at home] are thinking about them.” In the next case, Bacon’s character is moved into first class by a flight attendant who learns that he is escorting the body. While on the plane, another flight attendant offers him her crucifix, which Strobl passes on to Chance’s family. This crucifix, symbol of Christian martyrdom, ends up on Chance’s coffin, likening his sacrificial death to that of the Christ. Awaiting a connecting flight, Strobl decides to stay with the body in the cargo warehouse, where an airport worker is moved to offer him his personal belongings for sleeping. In another instance of showing how the dead soldier’s body affects people, Strobl is outside the plane, waiting to salute while the body is transferred to another vehicle. The disembarking passengers see his salute, take off their hats and stand in silence, paying respect to the dead with their distraught faces shown in close-up. In the final public display of support for the troops and acknowledging the national trauma, Strobl is escorting the hearse with the funeral procession (the coffin is covered by interment flag, and Strobl is dressed in his uniform), and people flash their car lights to show respect and appreciation, ultimately proving that the notion of common identity and sacrifice for the country are examples not only of internalizing death, but also of uniting the broken by wars communities. In this portrayal it is, after all, the fact that death is not only separating, but also bringing together those who feel themselves a part of wider imagined community, and in those cases the race, religion and gender do not play the part in dividing those communities anymore.

Chance’s family: his mother, stepfather, father, stepmother, sister (also a soldier, extending possible military tradition in the family) and sister’s fiancé, reveal another type of trauma. Strobl meets with them at school – in a neutral territory, which strips the meeting away from intimacy of the domestic household, which can often be seen in Vietnam PTSD films. The corridor walls at school are covered with soldiers’ photos –

presumably with those who died to serve their country. While in fact Strobl met with Chance's parents in a computer lab, the film version offers a classroom packed with patriotic symbols: there is the U.S. flag on the wall, the poster with soldiers in the background of the flag, and there is also a big globe and a map of the whole world (perhaps alluding to the imperialistic behavior of United States). The filmic imagery of the meeting is thus placed in more amiable space for speaking of the dignified transport of the dead body. During this gathering, Strobl assures the family that the body of their son was treated, all the way through, with upmost dignity and honor. He also mentions that they "do not mourn alone today" and that "all across America" people are thinking about them and praying for them, adding that Chance "has touched" many people along the way. In his short words, Strobl affirmed that the entire nation expressed grief and sympathy over Chance's death.

The funeral scene of *Taking Chance* accurately expressed how the community of Dubois felt about their veterans. Strobl in his own essay referred to the enormity of procession assuming that "neither in Detroit nor in Los Angeles" (compared with perhaps as these are "big" cities rather than like Dubois small ones with close-knitted community), as many people would attend the funeral as in small Dubois. This, of course, reminds that the small communities are usually more close-knit, and appreciative of their local heroes. The landscapes of Wyoming, which are vividly underlining the wilderness and Western appeal of the state, emphasize how nostalgic and supportive are the American communities. The blowing wind during the funeral scene, which breaks the silence of crowds gathered to mourn Chance, and the following tumbleweed scene not only bring the direct association with the Western, but also with the notion of instantaneity of past and present as illustrated by poet Wallace Stevens above. Dubois functions here also as rekindling the old memory traditions – while now

the memory is more individual and proliferated, the small community still shares the experiences, goes to the funeral together and support each other as seen in the bar scene. The homefront is thus depicted here in the axis of Western patriotic neighborhoods, which celebrate the valor and honor above all else.

*Taking Chance* is however not just a story of mourning at the homefront. Katz's film has many elements of pathos that turn the whole film from Strobl's narrative about Chance to a national tale of sacrifice and coping with death. Throughout the film, the scenes that showcase the treatment of the dead body – the sacramental cleaning and tending to the personal objects – are manifested in ritualistic procedures that ensure the body of a soldier is adequately treated at every stage with the highest honors. Ultimately, the tragic and traumatic death is purified, bringing the body as close to lifelike as possible just to become an entombed memory.

*Grace is Gone* (2007), a film written and directed by James C. Strouse, engages in the issue of homefront experience from another angle. While Katz's film focuses on the treatment of the body and the national trauma, Strouse emphasizes the individual suffering of the family, and in this particular case, of the dead soldier's husband. This eponymous soldier is, atypically, a woman, yet she is never seen on the screen besides in photographs, and is only heard on the telephone answering machine, limiting her existence to a haunting postmodern artifact. Although Strouse recognizes the woman as a soldier, he never really acknowledges her war experiences. Her family, like the family of Karen Walden in Zwick's *Courage Under Fire*, is here portrayed as vulnerable and orphaned. And yet on the other hand, Strouse reverses the trajectory that can be seen in the WW2 homefront films, where it is usually a woman left alone after her husband's departure to (or death in) the warzone.



The main character of *Grace is Gone* is Stanley Phillips (John Cusack), who along with his two daughters, 8-year old Dawn (Gracie Bednarczyk) and 12-year old Heidi (Shélan O’Keefe) goes on a spontaneous trip to Florida after Stanley receives a visit from the Casualty Notification Team informing him that his wife died in combat in Iraq. Stanley, in denial about the war, forbids his daughters to even watch the news, is incapable of announcing the news to his girls. Acting out of character, and mourning his wife silently, he offers to take the girls wherever they want – and so Dawn proposes to go to Enchanted Gardens, an amusement park in Florida. Their journey, with all its serenity and tenderness, pursues to the final outcome, where Stanley will be forced to tell his daughters about their mother’s death.

Stanley, as yet another male protagonist of Iraq War films, is himself an ex-soldier and a patriot. He drives a car with a yellow ribbon symbolizing support for U.S. troops. In the opening scene viewers see him as awkwardly walking and a bit hunched middle-aged man. Working at the Home Store, assumedly as the manager, he speaks to his workers enforcing military cadence in spelling words, shouting like a drill instructor rather than a store supervisor. His roughness is also visible in his relationship with daughters: learning that Heidi falls asleep in classes, he tells her to apologize to the teacher and to request extra homework. Heidi has problems sleeping because she is worrying about her mother, and to comfort herself she watches the “forbidden” television broadcasts at night hoping to hear news about the warzone. Stanley is unaware of any of it since he is not as close with his daughters as his wife was. As the viewers learn later on, Stanley had to leave the army because of his problems with eyes, and that he only managed to enlist in the first place because he cheated on the eye exam. When his wife was called to the front, Stanley felt ashamed that it was not he who was

going. Ultimately then Stanley's character is emasculated, and his military-like behaviors seem caricaturized.

Within the father-daughter story arc there is also a perfidious scene in Stanley's childhood home, where instead of finding his mother, he meets his brother, John (Alessandro Nivola), who is not only a strong opponent of the war, but also a cynic about the army and Stanley's "monkey-boy president" Bush. He asks Stanley's daughters what do they think about the war, to what Stanley quickly answers that they think "their mom's a hero." John is presented as a lazy anti-establishment liberal, who has unspecified plans for the future (wants to study medicine or law) and unfocused opinions. When he learns, however, of Grace's death, he goes to Stanley and shouts at him why is he going to amusement park instead of telling his children what happened. Stanley gets angry and attacks John, but in the end they come to understand each other. Although John is then leeching off the system and his mother, spending his days as a couch potato, he manages to go beyond his inane ranting, and let his brother do what he planned.

*Grace is Gone* illustrates the homefront in two ways: on one hand it is separated from the warzone, and life continues its regular rhythm; and on the other, the war plays out in "living rooms," where the television news coverage informs the people of situations outside the U.S. In one of the short scenes the viewers can see Heidi watching a powerful speech of Donald Rumsfeld, who affirms the war by saying, "we can, we must and we will see it through the completion" justifying the mission by the sacrifices that many young Americans and their families have already made. Rumsfeld claims also that in the 200-year old American history, the establishment has learned that "weakness is provocative," and that attacks and deaths that happen at the warzone prove strength. Yet the homefront experience: being able to simply go to the amusement park,

stay at hotels, play in the pool and go on a road trip is also noting that the daily lives of the U.S. citizens are still deeply embedded in the consumer culture. Just as it is noted in the Background of this work, right after 9/11, Bush called for “getting down” to Florida and visiting the Disney World, as the life should continue to be enjoyed as if there were no war. Although this trip to the Enchanted Gardens is for Stanley’s daughters the final prolongation of the status quo, it also shares Bush’s stand that enjoying life equals taking pleasure from such designates of consumer culture as amusements parks.

While film critics have disagreed on whether *Grace is Gone* is anti-war, pro-war, or totally apolitical, the film conforms to many postmodern aspects that do not necessarily label it in accordance with the political inclinations. In a possible anti-war statement, the film speaks of the death of a soldier, aligning it with insufferable losses. Even Rumsfeld’s speech, fading in the background, cannot be fully understood in terms of a necessary sacrifice when matched so astutely with a scene of Heidi’s insomnia and confusion, switching to listen to her father’s confession on the home’s voicemail. Then yet again, the only liberal in the film is a cliché, and when Heidi asks Stanley about what she has heard on the news “they say we went to war with the wrong people,” he replies that they have to “believe” that what they are doing is right. The film, however, is not siding either with right or left wing. It is simply a story of mourning. The ending, the funeral and consequent visit at the cemetery suggest that overcoming the loss is possible. And while some (e.g. film producer Mike Ryan) saw this conquering grief in line with Rumsfeld’s words, accepting a soldier’s death and recognizing her sacrifice do not necessarily make the film congruent with right wing conservatism.

Another look at mourning and homefront experience is presented in Paul Haggis’ *In the Valley of Elah* (2007). As it was already noted in the PTSD chapter, Haggis’

story includes the discussion on the PTSD and illustrates its effects. His collaboration with Boal, who together with Bigelow worked on *The Hurt Locker*, focuses to a similar extent on the psyche of the soldier, and investigates the controversies that happen in the warzone. *In the Valley of Elah (IVE)*, despite being partially a story of PTSD, focuses rather on the domestic homefront experience, not only displaying the broken soldier's behavior upon coming back, but also of a broken family coping with loss. Apart from that, Haggis takes up the subject of gender treatment in the positions of power, casting a woman as the detective dealing with the case. The film is then woven out of three main story arches: traumatized soldiers, family coping with their son's death, and treatment of a woman in the masculine world of the police force.

Putting a Vietnam veteran as the main character in the story about the homefront during the Iraq War helps viewers decode the Iraq experience by setting a reference point to knowledge of war, and to understanding of the new generation of soldiers' psyche as in comparison to the Vietnam veterans. While Vietnam films focus solely on the masculine characters, making women supporting characters as victims or ignorant civilians, *IVE* acknowledges the woman's power to oppose the dogmas of the masculine military laws. Haggis' film, thus, circulates within three spheres that try to balance various points of views.

The first sphere is the story of Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones), an ex-soldier, a husband and a father. Tommy Lee Jones, with his established persona as a man's man, has often played roles of authority—from Texas rangers (TV series *Lonesome Dove* [1989]), to U.S. deputy marshals (*The Fugitive* [1993]), and sheriffs (*No Country for Old Men* [2007])—and he enters with ease into the role of a former military man. In fact, both roles that Jones performed in 2007, one in *No Country...* and the other in *IVE* represent the same type of masculine hero, a lonely ranger whose best

days are behind him. While sheriff Bell in *No Country...* is aware of the evil in the world, Hank Deerfield has yet to discover what the war experiences can bring out in people. Choosing Jones to play Hank and reiterating the traits of a mythological U.S. ranger, Haggis brings back the cult of patriarchal masculinity. Hank, a Vietnam veteran, is a constant reminder to the viewers that the reality of his war and the experiences of the Iraq veterans are poles apart. As more of a cultish Western character, Hank shows the change in the homefront in terms of values that the cinema inculcates to contemporary viewers.

Hank's narrative is embedded in the political implications of the war. Throughout the whole journey, the discovery of his son's death and his killers, viewers can hear bits and pieces from political debates during the 2004 U.S. presidential elections, which mainly focused on the War on Terror and soldiers' actions in the warzone (e.g. the viewers can hear that Iraq is getting more dangerous because it is getting "more free"), and the subsequent effects of Bush's reelection. Apart from that, Hank's journey to Fort Rudd is framed with the usage of American flag, alluding to the patriotic values throughout the film. At first, Hank is seen stopping by the school where he notices that the flag is hanging upside down, which would suggest that America is in the national distress. Ignoring then the fact that the U.S. is at war, and that the media are bombarding with the news about the war, Hank stops and asks the caretaker to fix the flag's position. The caretaker, an immigrant, does not comprehend how exactly the U.S. flag should be settled, and he agrees to put it in the proper position. Hank treats the flag with honor and respect, and with sanctimonious tone they hang the flag together properly. Until this point, then, the homefront is portrayed as calm and without distress (hence the fixing of the flag), but embedded in the war debate. The war then is happening outside the daily lives, but is present in the "living rooms," diners, cars,

kitchens, etc. The framing device, however, proves in the end that the war exists at the homefront as well. When Hank eventually discovers the unrelenting effects of the Iraq War, he takes his dead son's American flag, shipped from Iraq as a gift for Hank (a postmortem artifact) and goes back to the same school, asking the same caretaker to hang it upside down – essentially admitting to himself now that America is, in fact, in distress.

Bush's second term, won in 2004, made him a true "wartime" president and was taken as a sign that a majority of U.S. citizens were supporting the Iraq War at the time. And while no characters comment on the war or the politics at the time, the slow understanding of negative effects of the conflict can be seen throughout the film. While the Bush administration was validating the American venture in Iraq, arguing that citizens need protection from terrorists, Haggis' film poignantly shows that this venture brings more loss and pain at the homefront. While both *Grace is Gone* and *Taking Chance* portray soldiers as those who are "placed in harm's way," retreating from the image of soldiers as warrior-killers and eliding the state's role in their movements (Lutz: 2002: 725), *IVE* shows soldiers as killers manufactured by the state's own objectives. Similarly, in *First Blood* the sheriff asks rhetorically why God would create John Rambo, to which Richard Crenna replies that God didn't create him, the Green Berets did, thereby likening Godly creation to the formative power of the military. Though Haggis is not straightforwardly imbuing his film with antiwar rhetoric, he is linking the state and soldier more closely than the previous films, and relies on this link to question the moral consequences of the war.

In a whodunit part of the story, an analysis of traumatized soldiers, viewers are solving the case of Hank's son's murder. The body, dismembered and burned, then left on the side of the road, haunts the film not only physically but also emotionally. A short

conversation between Hank and his son, Mike (Jonathan Tucker), in which he confesses “Dad... Daddy... something’s happened... you gotta get me out of here” repetitively comes back, not letting Hank sleep and reminding the viewers that these soldier-killers are someone’s children both before and after the army’s transformation. The investigation of Mike’s death, and the slow discovery of the kind of man Mike has become, reveal not only the damage done to Hank’s family, but also showcase how demoralized and corrupted is the system that sends these soldiers to war. Throughout the film the case is tossed from police to military, then back to the police, and the army tries to protect soldiers from the investigation, despite their suspicious behaviors and omissions in their statements.

The relationship between Mike and Hank is hinted in the allegorical title. When Hank tells the goodnight story to David, Emily’s son, the viewers can understand the relationship between Hank – holding the power in his household, and Mike – a boy that had to “face his fear.” Hank tells then David a story from the Bible – on how the future king of Israel would defeat Goliath, the giant who was challenging the Israelites to combat every day. A young boy, David, kills Goliath by shooting at him from a slingshot, but as Hank tells Emily’s son, he does it by conquering his fear. Hank, thus, sends his child against a monster, but instead of Mike becoming a hero conquering Goliath, he turns into a monster himself, killing a young boy on the road and becoming a torturer. Emily is right then in one sense telling her son that the story is not true, suggesting that there is no God on David’s side.

While the investigation goes on, Hank discovers uncomfortable truths about his son: Mike frequents strip clubs, engages in heavy drinking and taking drugs, and then he hears about Mike’s reputation for torturing prisoners (hence he was nicknamed “Doc” – for “checking” where it aches by continuously giving pain to the wounds). But it is

not until Hank watches Mike's videos from Iraq, recorded on his cell phone, that he discovers his son's underlying trauma: running over an Iraqi child. This unpremeditated killing, as followed by the military's rules not to stop, aggravates the violence among the men and continues once they come back to the country. They take drugs, drink and go to the strip clubs, trying to cope with the homefront reality. Their transformation, from "heroes" to monsters can be seen also in the way in which they have naturalized death. Corporal Penning (Wes Chatham) in a callous and demoralized speech gives details about killing Mike gory enough to illustrate that the army has turned these men into cold-blooded murderers. When Penning describes stabbing Mike, he seems nearly as if he is narrating an out-of-body experience rather than a regretful incident, with a lack of remorse that leaves the listeners speechless. Just as before, Hank was claiming "you do not fight beside the man and then do that to him," hearing later confession from Penning asserting that some other day it could have been Mike with a knife and him dead in the field, changes his understanding of soldiers' world that he knew from Vietnam.

Another story that focuses on the trauma among soldiers is embedded in Emily's prior case, in which a woman comes to her for help since her husband has drowned their dog. Emily refuses to help, since the prosecution of dog-related crimes is very low, and other detectives at the station are clearly laughing at her being a woman in the police force granted a higher position, and they send her animal related cases. Later on, however, already established some respect at the station dealing insistently with Mike's death, Emily is called to the crime scene, where the same woman is a murder victim. Entering the house, the viewers can see soldier's photos, suggesting that the perpetrator of the crime, woman's husband, was an Iraq War veteran. Seeing the woman drowned, she weeps, realizing the violence that the veterans bring from the warzone.



Women are seen as victims throughout the film, not just the woman whose complaint went unheeded. Emily is treated with condescension and mistrust by her colleagues, who suggest that she “fucked [her] way into the squad.” Hank’s wife is also the victim of her husband’s masculine priorities: she is angry feeling that both of her sons chose to go to the army following their father’s footsteps. After losing both of them, she blames Hank for it as she says that having a father like him, Mike “would have never felt like a man if he hadn’t tried” to enter the army. On yet another level, there are also the strippers (shown in many scenes – one of them [Frances Fisher] engages in conversations with Hank, making him uncomfortable, showing how Hank as a Vietnam veteran shares a different attitude towards prostitutes than the Iraq veterans), objectified and reduced to a position in which they serve men rather than be treated equally with them. In this sense the homefront experience of cities having military bases is leveled to the principles of most basic patriarchal society. Especially three women as exemplified here are all related to military men: Hank’s wife suffers because of her husband’s values as an ex-soldier and because of the army, for which her sons gave their lives; then, the woman who came complaining about her husband suffers for the very same reasons, as the government fails to provide proper treatment for traumatized soldiers, and Emily, as a daughter of a veteran and a single mother, is entangled in the loop of masculine power that ineluctably organizes her life.

The films analyzed in this section present the homefront as the place of those left behind, traumatized after not fully comprehending the war happening in a different land. Those left behind often regret that they were not the ones to lose their lives—Strobl in *Taking Chance* feels guilty for not having his part in fighting and he decides to escort the body to gain a deeper understanding of those who fight; Cusack’s character is emasculated as he was incapable of fulfilling his duty and protecting his family, and

Hank repents for sending his scared boys to the warzone. Unlike the characters of WW2 homefront films, the Iraq War contemporaries do not believe in the deeper understanding of the war, nor do they openly oppose it as in Vietnam films. Their regret, then, is linked to the feeling of failure for not being able to face the scary giant on their own, not to the feeling that the government forced their family members to waste their youth.

Whatever the focus in the Iraq War homefront film—whether it is the mourning and regret of the family, or the tale of failure—the fact remains that these films portray homefront also from the political vantage point. The politics link the genre with the context of nationality, questioning identity in times of national distress. All the films discussed above include national symbols, and play on them in various quantities. *Taking Chance* is perhaps most packed with images of flags, soldiers, and uniforms, linking not only to patriotism, but also to religion by suggesting sacrifice for the country as on par with the crucifixion of Christ. While *Grace is Gone*, on the other hand, plays on the national themes to a lesser extent, it still reveals strong ties with the governmental justifications in which the citizens and soldiers “ought to believe,” or be lost without the faith to fight. *In the Valley of Elah* questions these values, yet leaves ambiguous the motivation to fight. When Hank says at the police station that his son has spent the last 18 months “bringing democracy to a shithole and serving his country,” he expects to be treated with respect, while much of the people simply do not show any interest in both soldiers and their fight. Emily, in a revealing scene where she questions one of the soldiers, criticizes the way in which the soldiers abuse their power in the warzone “It’s a whole different world. You got power. (...) You put men facedown in the dirt, step on their backs, kick in doors. Somebody comes running at you, you kill them. You have to, right? (...) React or die?” While Emily is hardly the only Iraq War character that

questions the aggression in the army, her perspective is emphasized here the most. In *Grace is Gone* the anti-war views are presented by a lazy couch potato (marking them undesirable), and in *Taking Chance* Strobl often admits to his defeat by repeating that he only works in the cubicle and that “he was trained to fight,” but did not serve his purpose rhetorically asking “what does it make me?”

Though not packed with propaganda or justification of the war, these films show support for the army and the soldiers’ families. Both *Grace* and *Taking* revert the soldiers’ roles from portraying them as killers to showing them placed in harm’s way, as somebody’s loved ones who protect the homeland for everyone else. Haggis is the only one who, rather than just pitying the soldiers’ families, illustrates the nature of the soldier, portraying even Hank’s beloved son as a transformed kid who became a torturer and a killer.

Genre-wise these films share much in common with other homefront films, notably by focusing on the national trauma and the individual difficulties of dealing with the news of the dead soldiers. Ideally, however, they would be seen in consequence of these films, but as the war’s reality changes, the homefront subgenre also requires transformation. As mentioned earlier, the 1990s and early 2000s romanticized both war and homefront, calling for nostalgia of WW2. However, such romanticizing, though attempted by these films (all would-be tearjerkers), fails in the context of the Iraq War. The soldiers presented here, even though marketed as “heroes,” forsake the pathos of heroism for the sake of their trauma. Apart from that, the directors, notably Katz and Haggis, use the elements from the Western film genre, ultimately emulating the myth of American heroism and patriotism; and while for Katz this attempt is more successful, for Haggis it underscores the inadequacy of this myth is for both current generation and its war.

## 6.4 Protecting the Homeland

Where's bin Laden, Where's bin Laden  
He's probably runnin', probably hidin'  
Some say he's living at the Khyber Pass  
Others say he's at the Bush's ranch  
-- Ministry, "Khyber Pass"

In the end of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, the credits are accompanied by Ministry's song "Khyber Pass." While the metal tunes question where is Osama bin Laden, the foreshadowing of her next film and her interest in the Iraq War become evident. Her next collaboration with Mark Boal tries to give an outlet to this interest in the story of capturing bin Laden. *The Hurt Locker* was made in 2008, and nobody could have predicted at the time that bin Laden would be captured three years later; Bigelow and Boal's story shifted from feature on the Special Forces hunting bin Laden to the chronicle of capturing the most renowned terrorist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) is a complex film not only about capturing bin Laden, but also about politics, national priorities, and controversial ways of gleaning information. It is, above all, a film about protecting the homeland. This protection is related with the establishment of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) after 1947 to obtain the information and prevent attacks on the American soil; since 9/11 the agency has established a new goal to fight against terrorism and surveil the countries that are presumed to host terrorists. Post 9/11 CIA culture, which is still largely embedded in American life, notably by its presence in entertainment media, where series such as *Homeland* (2011-), *Alias* (2001-2006), and films like Bourne's trilogy, *The Siege* (1998), *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007) or *Salt* (2010), prove that the fascination with the subject and role of CIA in asserting the U.S. power in the world begin to constitute its own new version of mythologizing the American influence in media. And while many of these films and series present the CIA agents in a heroic way, romanticizing them

and exaggerating their power, they also update the Western hero as a government agent, who for patriotic reasons abandons her personal life to become an agent.

Interestingly, many of the CIA narratives feature women as main characters, reversing the warzone masculinity to the homefront intelligence as the feminized field. In *Homeland* there is Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), in *Alias* Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner), in *The Siege* Elise Kraft (Annette Bening), and in *Zero Dark Thirty* Maya (Jessica Chastain). The situation has changed much since the WW2 where the women were often marked as below men in many instances. Catherine Lutz mentions the situation of women at Fort Bragg and exemplifies how the homefront war bases worked analyzing a photograph of phone operators: “twenty (...) proudly posing for the cameraman on the steps of the Signal Corps building at Fort Bragg (...) All are women, their smiles free, shoulders back, hands interlocked in an affectionate sense of sisterhood (...) each is crisply dressed, each is white-skinned. Although two male officers stand above them, the women seem not so much their subordinates, as colleagues at important work together” (45). The photo retells cultural myths; men are positioned above women, serving as their symbolical protectors. The matter, however, was not simple as that, since women in WW2, especially those working in military bases and war industries, were often the ones to prepare food, ammunition, weaponry, maintain trucks, and help soldiers communicate with their families. Stripped from the context of combat, however, these roles domesticate women, and as in *Since You Went Away*, this domesticity diminishes their role as defenders of American values at home. This protection of values prevails in CIA films that feature women as the main characters, yet still surrounds them in the male-dominated world of their superiors. Although the women working in the CIA have a vital role in the homeland defense, this work is often presented in conflict with their feminine roles. Both Carrie in *Homeland*

and Sydney in *Alias* undergo a long process before they are ready to assume their new roles of mothers. For Sydney, becoming a mother is the “happy ending” that finishes her career as a CIA spy, and for Carrie it is yet another challenge to accept motherhood while staying a good agent.

Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* is even less capable of maintaining any friendly relations, not to mention a romantic relationship. She also struggles with the masculine world of the agency, often marginalized by the men in higher positions. Despite that, Maya successfully proves that she deserves to be treated with respect, as she proves in the end that she was right about the lead she chose from the very beginning. When the viewers first see her she is wearing a balaclava and observing the torture of a detainee. Dan (Jason Clarke), who is performing the waterboarding, at first offers her the monitor, but Maya proves herself tougher than he thinks. She often speaks her mind, discounting to whom she is speaking to. When the station chief in Islamabad asks her how she likes Pakistan, she simply says, “kinda fucked up.” Similarly, when she attends a high profile meeting at the CIA headquarters, and asked by the CIA Director who is she, she says “I’m the motherfucker that found this place. Sir,” taking credit for finding out Bin Laden’s potential hideout. Her frankness and her refusal to dwell on personal details—similar to the male heroes of the Western—finally earns her respect among the men. At first treated as a child, part of Bush’s “children’s crusade” against the 9/11 perpetrators, and moved away from the CIA establishment, finally Maya triumphs in this male-dominated territory.

9/11 is presented here in the context of necessary retribution, a point often reiterated by the characters, who profess the need to “protect the homeland.” The film starts with the voices of those trapped in the buildings and planes during the attack. And while all the agents want equally as much to capture bin Laden, the CIA’s main

objective is to prevent attacks similar to the one that happened on 9/11. Maya is often stopped by the station chief, who is more motivated by the “numbers” of arrests and actual results than the long and futile process of capturing one terrorist. For her, however, the issue is simpler, as she believes that to “protect the homeland, [they] need to get bin Laden.”

Throughout the film, the terrorists’ attacks emphasize this need to capture bin Laden, as in the belief that if it were asserted that he is dead, the “jihad” would be over. The first attack, on May 29, 2004, that happened in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, killed 22 people and claimed to be a “targeted attack against Westerners and foreigners.” Next is July 7, 2005, London bombings, which killed 52 people. Last two attacks are personalized, as Bigelow puts in them the main characters of the film. First, attack on September 20, 2008 in Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, happens when Maya is having a dinner with Jessica (Jennifer Ehle). Although the women have worked together for five years, it is the first time they have the chance to discuss their private lives. It brings Maya closer to Jessica, getting excited with her about the potential intelligence she may obtain from a Jordanian man, who claims that he wants to become an infiltrator for the CIA. Instead, on December 30, 2009, in Camp Chapman in Afghanistan, the man came to the meeting wearing a suicide vest, which he detonated shortly after getting out of the car. When Maya learnt about Jessica’s death, she became more convinced of her mission, believing that she was spared the same fate in order to finish the job. This belief is the only trope that suggests Maya has any faith. Though not purely religious, and not implied as motivated by any superstitious claims, the very conviction of being spared inspires her faith that she will be the one to find bin Laden.

The homefront is here also portrayed in terms of controversial torture practices that the U.S. government was applying on the detainees. The torture scene graphically

depicts waterboarding, and threats, confining the detainee in the small box, keeping him awake for long hours, treating him like a dog on a collar and stripping him naked in front of a woman (again, noting this as a humiliation in the view of Islamic values). The information gleaned from such practices, thus, is to be treated with doubt by the viewers. And while these practices are controversial, in the end Maya manages to capture bin Laden not due to torture, but thanks to her own long investigation, and good instincts. Torture, thus, proves ultimately dubious when it comes to information: the tortured prisoners would often say anything to stop the pain. With the political change, and Obama gaining power, all these practices become forbidden, to what characters respond without any emotions: it is only hinted in a scene, where Maya and Jessica watch Obama's speech "America doesn't torture" and that the U.S. government should "regain America's moral stature in the world." It is, as in "The Wolf's" (CIA's counterterrorism chief) that "Abu Ghraib fucked us," suggesting that if not for the public display of the prisoners' abuse, these practices would go on unabated. And while the CIA claimed that the torture scenes were largely exaggerated, Bigelow's editing: first playing the voices of dying people in 9/11, and then clashing it with the torture scenes, serve as justified in terms of the national trauma. Though the usage of interrogation tactics is shown here as debatable, according to Mark Boal it was due to employing torture that bin Laden's lair was finally discovered (Winter: 2013).

Despite the ambiguity in portraying the torture scenes, the film is, contrarily to its introductory "based on firsthand accounts of real events," rewriting American history like many other Hollywood films. Bigelow portrays the young generation of Americans (as represented by Maya) in line with the U.S. vengeance motif that repeats throughout the history. And while this vengeance is finally executed, showing a black-



and-white photograph of the dead bin Laden, the acknowledgement of fulfillment of mission and getting retribution for the national trauma lingers on.

Bigelow presents the homefront as the political playground for executing this retribution. With the change of power, and controversies afloat, the homefront is presented as in flux of more appropriate politics that would, in Obama's words, repair America's moral stature. The agents who protect the homeland are dependent on the current politics, and they also contribute to the overcoming of the national trauma. Maya, as an exemplary case, is seen crying after killing bin Laden: twofold meaning is disguised here: one, suggesting that Maya can now mourn her dead colleagues, who died in the course of years trying to capture the 9/11 perpetrator, and two, that after executing the vengeance, the grief still remains a part of traumatic past.

The traumatic past is thus always shown as possible to overcome in the Iraq War films. And just as Maya can get over the trauma by successfully capturing bin Laden and being able to finally mourn, so can the characters in Strouse's, Haggis' and Katz's films. The death brings trauma, but the social rituals help to conquer the grief. The homefront films, as examined in this chapter, show that the immediate postmodern nature of information from the warzone bring the close ones at the front nearer to those they left behind. Inevitably these news also seed the fear that the death is part of the war preparing for it to a certain extent those left at the homefront.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS

Since the Iraq War's inception the awareness of having to fight "over there" has affected much of the U.S. news broadcasting. From the media outlets focusing on individual stories of the soldiers to the implementation of war characters in TV shows such as *CSI*, *Homeland*, *NCIS*, *Bones*, *House*, and many others, which featured characters of ex-soldiers/doctors/journalists who went to the warzone, the Iraq War played out in the living rooms of many American households. And while many film critics (notably John Belton and Robert Eberwein) claim that not much cinema has dedicated its subject to the Iraq War per se, in fact many films presented in this thesis have spoken on the subject thoroughly, starting from the depiction of the war experience in Iraq, the homefront involvement of the families, and the soldiers' own trauma after coming back home.

As a genre, war cinema is rooted deeply in the conventions of World War II, which, necessarily to mention, was much different from contemporary warfare. Despite these differences, WW2 films have had the biggest influence on the present-day war cinema: they still dominate the war film genre, and their canon influenced the

conventional representation of other wars. They are still being made,<sup>1</sup> much more often than any other war films, and they do much better at the box office. Although the Iraq War films do not do as well financially, they also echo much of the formula of the WW2 films, and consequently of Vietnam War films, especially in portraying issues such as PTSD. Yet Iraq War films alter many of the WW2 and Vietnam films' conventions that in effect discourage many contemporary viewers. What makes them so conventionally different, apart from altering the rules established by the WW2 and Vietnam films, is the lack a serious commentary on the war's political connotations, a morally clear soldier-enemy dynamic, and combat action that remains commonplace in the earlier films. All these relate to what Baudrillard defined by the term hyperreality, noting how the representations became indistinguishable with their equivalents in time ("waning of the political" [Friedberg, 1993: 179], blurring enemy/victim, and virtualizing the battlefield). Consequently then the media (news coverage, films) blurred the lines between the war and its image, decentering both the viewers of this war spectacle and its actors, commodifying the war experience by producing it and consuming its representation. Ontologically then, the Iraq War is a very good illustration to how postmodernism managed to intertwine itself in the daily life and the films on it often embody this mesh.

All these films allude to many elements typical for other film genres such as Westerns, women's films, documentaries, historical dramas and even comedies. They consist of mixed generic components that somehow altogether make them fit into a category of the Iraq War film. This category is thus a *mélange* of genres, and in some

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<sup>1</sup> In the last two decades, many USA-produced films about the World War II focused the attention of media outlets throughout the world. The memory of fighting Americans was commemorated in these films, notably by Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* (2001), Todd Komarnicki's *Resistance* (2003), Terry Farley-Teruel's *Beautiful Dreamer* (2006), Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters From Iwo Jima* (2006), and George Clooney's *The Monuments Men* (2014) among many others.

cases, notably in journalists' films, it tends to turn to pastiche and parody. The Western is often used for retrieving the old myths and returning the previous source material, but ends up rewritten to only highlight more how unromanticized is the war on terror. This all adds up in making the Iraq War to be reviewed for the audiences to reexhibit very recent past, not yet evoking nostalgia and moving the war to immediate representation.

It needs to be noted that the media's participation in representation of this war somewhat decreased the importance of physical presence in the experiences of people and events. What it means for Iraq films is that the war was already relived in its course, breaking the boundaries between here/homefront (as seen by the haunting presence of media in the homefront films that decenter the subjects—they are both at home and there in the warzone), there/warzone, and changing what was seen as personal to public (the war trauma is experienced by the whole nation). These are most dramatic changes that are often associated with postmodernism, and are foreshadowed for the war cinema in the future in general, not only as in case of the Iraq War.

And just as these postmodern qualities can be seen in Iraq films in the postmodern pastiches of the past forms, they can also be seen in the employment of new cinematic tools that try to portray how virtualized/video-game like has the war become. Especially the warzone/"combat" films exhibit this feature, where directors, such as Brian de Palma, Kathryn Bigelow or Paul Greengrass, use different types of cameras (candid, 360-degrees, etc.) or rapid editing (as in intensified continuity) to emphasize this blurring of time and space in the war experience.

Iraq War films have thus their own cinematic aura that relates to these quickly disappearing events replaced by other "news." Perhaps this is one of the reasons for so many WW2 films that bring the "good war" nostalgia along. The soldiers that go to

“new” wars are often enlisting in effect of this longing, supported by many WW2 productions that embedded themselves in the cultural memory, and often disregard that the warfare and the role of the soldiers have drastically changed. Whatever the case, most of Iraq films flopped at the box offices, somewhat proving the threat of the “modern” and allure of the nostalgia.

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## APPENDIX

### BOX OFFICE DATA

All data comes from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> and <http://www.imdb.com>

#### IRAQ WAR FILMS 1999-2014

TITLE (year): ordered chronologically	Director	Budget	US Box Office	Total – Worldwide (US and foreign) Box Office	Awards
<i>Three Kings</i> (1999)	David O. Russell	\$75,000,000	\$60,652,036	\$107,752,036	Best Film: Boston Society of Film Critics Awards
<i>Jarhead</i> (2005)	Sam Mendes	\$72,000,000	\$62,658,220	\$96,889,998	
<i>In the Valley of Elah</i> (2007)	Paul Haggis	\$23,000,000	\$6,777,741	\$29,541,790	Top Independent Films: National Board of Review, USA
<i>Grace is Gone</i> (2007)	James C. Strouse	\$2,000,000	\$50,899	\$1,066,141	Audience Award for Drama: Sundance Film Festival
<i>Redacted</i> (2007)	Brian de Palma	\$5,000,000	\$65,388	\$782,102	
<i>The Situation</i> (2006)	Philip Haas	\$1,000,000	\$48,195	\$48,195	
<i>The Hurt Locker</i> (2008)	Kathryn Bigelow	\$15,000,000	\$17,017,811	\$49,230,772	Best Motion Picture of the Year: Academy Awards, USA

					Best Film: BAFTA Awards  Movie of the Year: AFI Awards
<i>Stop-Loss</i> (2008)	Kimberly Peirce	\$25,000,000	\$10,915,744	\$11,207,130	
<i>The Messenger</i> (2009)	Oren Moverman	\$6,500,000	\$1,109,660	\$1,521,261	Movie of the Year: AFI Awards
<i>The Men Who Stare at Goats</i> (2009)	Grant Heslov	\$25,000,000	\$32,428,195	\$68,968,688	
<i>Green Zone</i> (2010)	Paul Greengrass	\$100,000,000	\$35,053,660	\$94,882,549	
<i>Zero Dark Thirty</i> (2012)	Kathryn Bigelow	\$40,000,000	\$95,720,716	\$132,820,716	Movie of the Year: AFI Awards  Best Film: National Board of Review, USA

### WORLD WAR II FILMS 1998-2014

TITLE (year): ordered chronologically	Director	Budget	US Box Office	Total – Worldwide (US and foreign) Box Office	Awards
<i>Saving Private Ryan</i> (1998)	Steven Spielberg	\$70,000,000	\$216,540,909	\$481,840,909	Best Motion Picture – Drama: Golden Globes
<i>Pearl Harbor</i> (2001)	Michael Bay	\$140,000,000	\$198,542,554	\$449,220,945	
<i>Enemy at the Gates</i> (2001)	Jean-Jacques Annaud	\$68,000,000	\$51,401,758	\$96,976,270	
<i>The Good German</i> (2006)	Steven Soderbergh	\$32,000,000	\$1,308,696	\$5,914,908	
<i>Defiance</i> (2008)	Edward Zwick	\$32,000,000	\$28,644,813	\$51,155,219	
<i>Valkyrie</i> (2008)	Bryan Singer	\$75,000,000	\$83,077,833	\$200,276,784	
<i>Inglorious Basterds</i> (2009)	Quentin Tarantino	\$70,000,000	\$120,540,719	\$321,455,689	
<i>The Monuments Men</i> (2014)	George Clooney	\$70,000,000	\$78,031,620	\$154,984,035	
<i>Fury</i> (2014)	David Ayer	\$68,000,000	\$85,817,906	\$205,517,906	